THE RIGHT MAN is suspense/literary fiction, at 69000 words. It follows the theme of my other works: bringing romantics into the “real" world. In this double tale, the “right man” proves illusive (especially as the logic of parents arranges these matches). The issue is precisely the impossibility of selecting the right man, the blindness of the endeavor, the damage.

Two stories are interwoven. The outer story is about a bad marriage, and the inner story also is about a bad marriage, and how two very different women (one very intelligent, the other slow-witted) extricate themselves. They are neighbors. They bond. The slow-witted one warns the other to ”stay good”. while she herself does not.

Our narrator interlaces both stories. She is Rhea Stoakes, married to a selfish egotist who fails at everything and does not want his wife to succeed. Rhea resents his selfishness but tries to honor the sanctity of marriage. She becomes the family provider, working as a secretary, while pursuing her own ambition to become a fiction writer.

In the OUTER story Rhea succeeds while her husband Haiden deteriorates. Haiden is a charismatic, but infuriatingly fastidious man, a failed actor, who later earns a college degree in Business Administration but fails at every undertaking. He becomes a stay-at-home husband who counsels college students who rent rooms. When one young woman goes on for her doctorate in business and is hired by a university, he begins his final deterioration. He becomes fat, slovenly, and promiscuous.

The INNER story is about an inarticulate woman, Celia Vortek, who loves her first husband, a cartoonist, whom the parents kick out, thinking he is a bum. Celia is forced into a second marriage with a bad man, and creates a scandal. She does not “stay good”.

The novel offers darkness. It offers humor especially in the person of Gladys Desiree, a love-starved older woman who is at war with Celia, claiming Celia stole her lover. Humor also comes from Johnnie Banghart, an adult male who peroxides his hair and behaves promiscuously like a teenager.

THE RIGHT MAN

Part I

1

My parents were the richest people in our small, self-contained community. Our family name was everywhere: Morse Hardware, Morse Bakery, Morse Library, and so on. Even the chamber of commerce was housed in the Morse building. How we came to be so rich meant going back a few generations to the selling of liquor first

from the back of a truck, then from under a tin roof over a store front. Once the Morse name was operating out of a store, everything followed. From then on, young men courted me with an eye to inheriting our family businesses. That was my perception of it, and that was what counted. So I was wary of the attention I received. I thought all young men were only interested in our family money, in my inheritance, in how they could take charge of the various ready-made businesses. My parents believed the right man for me would come along and I would settle down. I believed what my parents told me.

My father was strong, very much controlling, and wanted a son-in-law to take over the businesses one day. My mother was a a quiet and obedient wife. She told me she married for love, but I knew my father only as he was after he became successful.

My father had definite ideas: he was ambitious to perpetuate the family line. So when my older sister Carlotta married George, my father immediately wrapped an arm around George's shoulder, suggested that George change his registration at college from Fine Arts to a degree in Business Administration and move on to earn a Master's in Business Administration, an MBA, in order to enter the family businesses. I must emphasize that he was also very charming and persuasive: "My daughter is accustomed to fine things, regardless of what she says about being the wife of a struggling artist. Do you want to be a good provider or not?" And George acquiesced. As I said, my father had definite ideas and was very persuasive. After all, he had proven himself in the business world. My older sister Carlotta was like my mother: quiet and obedient.

When George earned his MBA and took over the businesses, he was successful; the businesses thrived, and everything was working

out. My father anticipated the day his second son-in-law, my future husband, would also take a partnership in the businesses; then my father would retire, take himself out to fish for trout and tell my mother to get the frying pan ready.

So naturally, my father turned to me and wanted me also to marry a business type like George, and expected me to follow in my mother's footsteps and my sister's. My mother had chosen the name Carlotta for my older sister, very romantic. I told my mother that I would like to marry for love.

You see, I started out as a romantic. I daydreamed through my childhood listening to romantic music and reading romantic novels. I spent days in the library steeped in books about great art. But I had not been rewarded for my devotion. I did not excel in any art form.

My father thought my romanticism came from being too high spirited. He had straightened out my mother's thinking in her time, and he was now telling me in mine to seek out someone who would act as a counter-weight to my impulses. Father claimed that even as an infant I fairly leaped out of his arms instead of settling into the nest that he and my mother provided. Mother, completely under the control of my successful father, came to worry about the over-abundance of exuberance in her girl. "It is definitely not becoming," she said when I was old enough to understand. "As your father says and I wholly concur, it exhausts other people; it wears them out. Frankly, darling, your curiosity to explore and taste everything reflects a certain, well, excessiveness, greed, yes, greed. You should not desire too much, for that is the voice of Satan whispering in your ear to lead you astray." My mother took my father's advice by finding refuge from her fancies in religion.

Both of my parents agreed that I should take an interest in the moral intelligence of young men. “Seek out a mate who will keep you tempered, a sober person from our own religious community.” And, “Seek out a mate who will be a good provider.” Both parents stood together: “You want an honorable man whom you can trust and admire.”

2

So when a tall handsome man, a few years older—maybe as much as ten years older, well, I don’t know, but regardless—one spring evening stood in the entrance of the social hall of our church and held his head nobly, projecting a strong magnificent profile in all directions, my parents caught their breath.

He fairly blinded my parents as he strode into the social hall and basked in the comfort of unaccountable familiarity as he calmly wove his way through the crowd. He greeted people as if he knew them and spoke with the golden tongue of a preacher, spoke about the virtuous life, about the lofty natural idealism in all these good people. And when he came up to my parents and was introduced to their daughter, he looked deeply into my eyes, cupped both of my hands in his and said, “Here you are!” Well, that was that. He was telling my parents who were beaming at the light that shone out of him that their daughter’s prince had arrived. He said, “I have been searching high and low for your daughter and finally found her.” My mother’s knees buckled.

Soon thereafter, when he became a member of our congregation, my father whispered into my ear, “Haiden Stoakes is a spellbinder. You will see; his talk is the great thing about him. It will

make his fortune. He is steady, strong, and full of noble convictions." And my mother said, "He is very, very handsome." I saw an older man with smooth skin and a full crop of light wavy hair combed with exceptional neatness. They were saying, "This is the right man for you. This is the man you should marry."

It was true. He was a spellbinder.

3

During our courtship, Haiden spent very little money on me because he had very little to spend. However, no one would have guessed his modest financial situation. His suits seemed to be custom tailored, giving the illusion that this was their first wearing. Evidently, he took precision care with the crease in his slacks, the brush to his jacket, the knot in his tie. His fingernails were manicured, he wore a small green jade ring on his pinkie finger, and his shoes shone to a high polish. Haiden was not flamboyant in his dress. He was exacting. He was so expert at his grooming to the point of setting himself apart. And just as he hovered over his sartorial needs, he hovered over me.

In those first months, he never told me what kind of work he did to support himself. Whenever I asked, he tossed it aside saying, "It doesn't matter; it is/was of no consequence." Well then, it wasn't. I knew he never lived the low life of a gigolo to some older woman; nor had he spent time in jail. Haiden was a good man; he listened to a high calling. When Haiden arrived in our community and entered our church, he spoke out vehemently for every good cause. His fervor catapulted him to the vice-presidency of the Social Action Committee. Throughout the summer he spent all of his daytime hours at church. And he courted me in the evening.

H was not only a great talker, he was an amorous suitor. He showered me with chivalric protectiveness. I felt more than flattered; the better word would be, “cherished”.

Eventually, I approached him again about his life. And this time he sighed and gave in. “I suppose there’s no avoiding this. Well, I’ll come out with it and afterwards put it to sleep forever.”

“It is only my natural curiosity, Haiden.”

“If you must know,” he grimaced, “I was an actor. No, not an actor; rather, a would-be actor, mind you, and that makes all the difference. I anticipated a great career, and found myself waiting in the wings merely to walk on stage and recite my line. Hah! I was the king of the one-liners. You can’t know how dismal and tedious it was to hang around, like a non-entity, burdened with inconsequential parts. During the daytime I waitered so I wouldn’t starve, and there, too, I was a non-entity, scooping up coins which I could barely distinguish from the table crumbs.”

“Oh, I see.”

“No, you don’t. I was fired from every job I ever held because I was always late.”

“Oh!”

“Do you know why I was always late?”

“Not really.”

“Because I wanted to see if people would notice. If they noticed, then I knew I hadn’t disappeared.”

“Oh my!”

“As a small boy, I believed——now don’t you laugh at what I am about to utter——I believed I would grow up to be a genius.”

“How adorable!” I said.

He frowned at me. “Adorable? It was like a monkey on my back. The thought lives yet in me, no longer of being a genius, but of claiming some kind of exceptionalism.”

“I see.”

“Some people feel that way about themselves. It isn’t uttered aloud for fear of ridicule; but deep within us,” he pounded a fist against his heart, “we believe we are exceptional in some way, and we are compelled to discover that exceptionalism. Not all of us remain loyal to the quest; most give up and settle. I am determined to find mine. My antenna circles constantly to attend oncoming signals. One day a signal will come at me, perhaps subtly or perhaps almost shattering my eardrum, and I shall charge forward into my destiny. My gifts suddenly will become apparent, and I will do well, better than most, perhaps far better than my competition. Setbacks will arise, too, for I am a realist, after all. But overwhelmingly, once having found my true way, my success will follow, as is the way with exceptional people.”

How beautifully he spoke.

“It remains my burden, Rhea. You could say I came into the world with the burden of finding my destiny. I knew about this quest at an early age so I began to read the biographies of great men. I was looking for commonalities between them and myself, ways to proceed.” He held his body proudly, he drummed his manicured fingernails and twisted his green jade pinkie ring, and I took in every word.

“Haiden, I believe you can do anything you want in life.”

“That’s what I want to hear from my girl.”

And after that, Haiden and I were married.

The wedding was lavish. The wedding cake itself was five tiers tall to accommodate all the guests.

My parents were obviously pleased that I was settling down. They were even more pleased with my choice. I trusted their judgment, as my own had been labeled scatterbrained fantasy. I had never been practical. In fact I was famously impractical. Now. I felt I was maturing. I was entering society, a married woman. Besides, everyone admired my husband. They concurred with my parents' view that Haiden would become a great man some day.

My only sibling, an older sister, Carlotta, was my matron of honor, was already married—to George. I really did not know them well, probably because Carlotta was a good deal older than I, almost of a different generation. We were mutually distant from each other. Now that I was married, maybe we would draw closer. I didn't know how they felt about Haiden.

4

While my father now had both sons-in-law in his classroom, so to speak, instructing them, coaching them, guiding them in business, I was not required to change as a married woman, so I did not. I continued with my interests; I spent my time reading literature. Literature had always been the sacred altar before which I lay prone. I worshipped as a disciple, but I felt too humble to lift my head and look into the eye of the oracle. But George and Haiden were listening carefully to my father. He was their oracle. They listened to the ways he expanded his businesses, to his system for taking out a mortgage on one business to start another business and still another. "Out of

one business, I grew many," he boasted, "and our family name grew in eminence."

George and Carlotta, Haiden and I lived in the big house with my parents. We had our own suites, our own friends, and our own bank accounts. We had the comforts provided by servants to take care of our laundry needs and meals. George applied his MBA and worked hard alongside my father. Haiden listened carefully to my father and used what he called his own "common business sense" as my father had done before him. My father had not gone to college, but he respected that each of the sons-in-law worked in individual ways. He believed in his ability to size up men. My father felt confident in his sons-in-law and decided to enter his retirement, putting both sons-in-law in charge of all of his businesses while he bought a cabin in the mountains to fish for trout, saying to my mother, "Mrs. Morse, get the frying pan ready."

However, while my father was trout fishing, George and Haiden were coming to different conclusions about how to run the businesses. George wanted to keep the businesses running steadily in place, and Haiden had the idea to expand the businesses, as my father had done. Haiden was very persuasive with his golden tongue; and had his way with George. But he expanded too fast and too much. The result was that one business fell into arrears, and then the domino principle came into play. The businesses began to collapse, one after the other, speedily, uncontrollably, until bankruptcy showed its head.

My father drove down from his mountain home, away from his trout fishing, to call an emergency family meeting. "How could you let such a thing happen? My life's work is gone. George, what good was your college education, your Master's in Business Administration? Your MBA? And Haiden, you became greedy and reckless. You two

were foolish, stupid. A man is defined by his work. You two have defined yourselves as failures and destroyed everything I built up. I did not foresee your shortcomings; that was my failure. It's my own fault for trusting in you. So now I, too, am a failure." His voice grew in intensity and volume, "My entire life's work! Gone!" His breathing came hard. His jugular vein bulged; he froze into a stroke that left him without speech and resigned him to a wheelchair and a care facility for the rest of his life.

My mother, always so quiet and obedient, now took my father's place as head of the family. She suggested that the bankruptcy must be kept a secret. "The big house must be sold. I'll pay off our debts with the proceeds, and divide the remainder evenly, a third for each of us. You two young couples will be like newlyweds starting out, fending for yourselves." Seeing my mother in this strong role surprised me. She said, "You can start fresh, you young men."

"Not business again," said George. "I'm going to take another path. I was talked out of my desire to study art. But now, I have a second chance and I'm taking it."

Haiden said, "You mean you're going to register for college as a Fine Arts major?"

"Yes."

"How will you live?" Haiden asked.

Carlotta spoke up. "We'll be all right for a while. We'll buy a small house, pay cash, and I'll become employable. We'll manage."

"And what about us, Haiden?" I asked.

Haiden said, " I don't know."

Haiden claimed he had to find his exceptionalism. In the meantime, we took our share from the sale of the big house and, like George and

Carlotta, purchased a small house for the two of us. I gained employment as a secretary for an accounting firm that had handled my father's businesses, and Haiden did something puzzling: he equipped a beautiful study for himself in anticipation of his future career, whatever it would be. I'm talking about a red leather sofa and two wing-backed leather chairs to match, an over-sized mahogany desk, and a floor-to-ceiling bookcase with glass doors. A silver letter opener and pair of silver scissors lay on his mahogany desk alongside a Tiffany lamp. He looked all around his completed study and said with satisfaction, "This is fitting." And then he surprised me by entering the university to pursue a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration.

Not only did his decision to enter college surprise me, but more so his particular choice: a business tract. Then again, he did like money. Not for its own sake, not as a game of keeping tract, as was the case of many businessmen, but for its aesthetic comforts as demonstrated in his office furnishings. It was obvious that he intended to be a rich man. Was that to be his exceptionalism? Perhaps any chosen tract would have surprised me because it immediately eliminated so many other possibilities for which I thought he was equally suited.

He committed himself to his Business Administration courses. Even so, he also enrolled for general courses: history and English and sociology, an entire feast. I thought this was a good sign; he was the "renaissance man." The dictionary defined the renaissance man as a person with many talents or areas of knowledge. During our evenings, he read aloud from his textbooks as he followed me from room to room while I performed my household chores. He was exuberant, bumping into furniture and walls; I was enraptured, listening. During

the daytime when he was not in class, he put his feet up on the sofa and read is college books all day.

So, I worked as a secretary, kept house, and cooked; and Haiden studied and took classes. My physical labors were exhausting in a different way from his mental labors. He struggled with his essays and take-home tests, procrastinated terribly over everything, worked and reworked his papers, tore them up and started again, endlessly, until finally I concluded my husband suffered from the evils of perfectionism.

Even so, four years at college ballooned to five because Haiden was unable to resist extra courses in art and literature and political science and sociology and philosophy. He said, “These courses round out a person’s character. I will not begrudge you the same opportunities, Rhea.”

“Fair enough,” I responded.

Haiden gently smiled and added, “But we’re quite comfortable for the time being, aren’t we?”

And so he indulged himself for an additional year, during which he often said, “I read the great minds; I study the accomplishments of the highest civilizations; and I engage in dialogs with my professors as if their classes belong just to the two of us. What a life! You will see, Rhea.”

Sometimes Haiden would have afternoon coffee with one of his professors and come home saying, “I can tell Professor_____ highly regards the depth and originality of my thoughts. Yes, I can tell.”

At the end of that additional year when graduation time drew near, he ventured to risk saying, “I could be coaxed into continuing on for a sixth year.” He glanced at me and laughed quickly.

I also laughed. But looked away, hurt.

Should I give him a sixth year? Indulge him still again? Impatience had been growing in me; I wanted my turn at college. If I granted him the sixth year, I would have to reign in again. No, I already waited five years. Hadn't I given plenty already? He could easily become a professional student and I could lose my turn forever if I continue to indulge him; he is getting used to this, and it isn't bothering him very much. I must be firm. I was entitled to my turn now; I earned it.

5

George's father had been an artist, a painter. After the funeral service for his father, everyone gathered in an art gallery for food and drink. George said about registering this second time around as a Fine Arts major, "I felt like I was coming home." The father's friend who owned the gallery said, "Your father had confessed to me that you sold out to the god of money. He would be pleased with your decision to start again on the right track for you."

His father's paintings were displayed on all the walls. George looked around and said, "In these rooms, my father's soul is on exhibit. His body was buried this day, merely his body. Here, in the gallery, is his beautiful living soul."

Carlotta was not upset with her husband's decision; she was not even surprised. With their share of the money from the sale of the big family house, they bought a small house on a busy commercial street, one of those leftover houses never snapped up by any realtor to be transformed into an apartment building. George moved his art equipment into the garage, put in windows for good lighting, and

worked on his canvasses. But Carlotta surprised everyone. She used the living room to run an ice cream store.

I was astounded. “Carlotta, I cannot believe this turn for you. An ice cream parlor, of all things!”

“I let Dad run my thoughts and my life. He wanted to turn me into Mom: obedient and servile. But I always wanted to have my own business, just as Dad had his. And Dad is no longer controlling George.”

“I can’t blame your father,” said George. “It was my own fault; I admit I was seduced by money.”

“You were seduced by my father’s success in business, seduced by the way our family lived,” she said.

“I thought, Carlotta, that you wanted that life.”

Carlotta shook her head. “Fortunately, George and I found out that such a life wasn’t for us. I think we would have opted out eventually even if Dad were not in the picture.”

“Why an ice cream parlor?” I asked.

She laughed. “Have you ever noticed what happens to people that when they eat ice cream?”

I laughed. My sister was quirky in her own way, if given a chance. “No, what happens to us when we eat ice cream?”

“A glaze of beatification comes over our eyes. Do you know why that is?” Because we are transported back to childhood, that’s why. To our birthday parties when we were unconditionally loved, back to lazy summer afternoons playing outside with our friends and waiting for the ice cream truck. Problems simply do not exist while we were eating ice cream. The next time you drive up to a stop light and a pedestrian saunters through the crosswalk eating an ice cream cone, you can point and say, ‘There goes a person who at this moment

doesn’t have a care in the world, doesn’t want to influence or set a scheme to get something out of someone. And why? Because that person is back in a childhood with friends and lovely times, with plenty of time to play. Well, I‘m playing again.”

George offered, “Carlotta has been encouraging me to play—to return to art.”

Carlotta said, “I feel like we have opted out of society because we didn’t buy a grand house with a big mortgage, and George didn’t use his MBA to make money. Everything will work out for us,” she said.

I had always thought Carlotta was a replica of our mother, until now, that is: obedient and sacrificial. But it turned out that now I was the one more like our mother—I had been self-sacrificing toward my husband for five years. But all that was in the past. Things would be different now.

Shortly before Haiden’s graduation, the college conducted a job fair on campus. Companies propped up booths on the lawn in front of the Morse Library, passed out information, job applications, conducted interviews, and set up appointments for future interviews. Haiden attended and came home carrying a tote bag overflowing with brochures to consider. Whether or not he actually interviewed, he never said. But after he sat down in one of his wing-backed leather chairs, spread out all the brochures, read them and reread them, he remained undecided. He did begin to look for employment but talked about the right company, about the importance of the fit, and said, “The fit is critical.”

He spent hours each day in the research of different businesses. He made phone calls to company after company, and he spun himself

dizzy until, unable to move at all, he threw his pencil into the air saying, “I can’t make up my mind.”

“Well, I’m unable to suggest any specific one, Haiden. You know more about these things than I do.”

His procrastination continued. Was it some kind of fear? Had he made a mistake with his chosen tract of Business Administration? If so, it was too late now. I really preferred not to invent reasons for his behavior. That was dangerous and unsound. Months flew by. But I reasoned that the situation would work itself out of its own volition.

And it did. A classroom colleague, a hail fellow type whom Haiden did not know particularly well had signed onto a commercial real estate brokerage house, Boxer and Boxer, and ran into Haiden one day telling him, with a pat on the back, “The possibilities are enormous, old man. Why, you’re a born salesman. I tell you the real estate business is perfect for you; you should come on board.” Haiden, flattered and supremely confident in his ability to speak well, and having difficulties making up his mind, said, “Why not! One company is as good as another. In the end, it’s all serendipitous.” And that’s how he finally entered the business world: with a push into the water. Now he would swim by himself— like a duck in water.

That night, we went out for dinner to celebrate Haiden’s graduation, and Haiden’s emotions were high; he dreamed up to the stars. “Maybe, one day I’ll have my own brokerage firm, Haiden Stoakes and Associates, and the mayor will invite me to sit next to him at business luncheons. We’ll eat rubber chicken. . . .” Oh how I laughed as he talked out of the side of his mouth with an imaginary cigar and snapped his imaginary suspenders holding up his imaginary pot belly——acting out amusing cliches of success.

The moment Haiden started his employment, I purchased a second-hand schoolteacher's desk for my turn at college. The accouterments, so important to Haiden, were of no importance to me. I was finally ready to register for college.

"Perhaps both of us should work for awhile," he suddenly said, "until I get on my feet, and we have a little more in the bank."

I heard my wheels screech to a halt.

6

Haiden did not find sales in commercial real estate easy. The hours were long and the work was hard, and Haiden was impatient. He did not adjust to the tedium. His golden tongue was not translating into sales. He was not a listener; he was more of a preacher who could carry himself aloft, oblivious of his listener. He could become so swept up in his own oratory that I laughed out, "Haiden, be sure your potential customer is on the wing as you soar."

His commissions came hard and so few in number that he was as startled as I was. The others in the office were sympathetic: "This is a funny business, Haiden. It's feast or famine. No steadiness." But for Haiden, there never was a feast. In the entire five years that he worked for Boxer and Boxer Commercial Realty, his sales never increased. Neither slow seasons nor brisk seasons for the other salesmen in the fleet reverberated on his calendar. For him, the seasons were all alike. Steadily he went along, and steadily he earned a less than spectacular income. Of course he looked glum; who wouldn't? Thank goodness for my job. Neither one of us said a word.

7

Fred and Annabelle, our next-door neighbors in our little house, were our closest friends.

Fred said, “Haiden, old man, you’re a very bright guy. You should be earning more money so that your wife can stay home and keep my wife company.”

Annabelle said, “Maybe you pretend, Haiden.”

“What does that mean?” asked Fred, reprimanding her.

“Fred, all I mean is that Haiden may be pretending to be a real estate person while he really believes he’s something else, something better.” Then she turned to Haiden. “Haiden, what did you do before you went into real estate?”

Fred hushed her up. “That’s none of our business, Annie.” Fred looked at Haiden. “Maybe you’re not reaching high enough. You’ve got to find your niche and market yourself. I mean, after all, Haiden, old man, when a person has been to college, that says something about him. He’s a cut above us poor slobs.”

“Fred, you know you’re content being a poor slob.”

Fred and Annabelle Potter were more or less our age. They owned a pet store and hopefully used more finesse with animals than they did with human beings. Their house reflected their preferred world, a habitat choked with vegetation and the sounds of exotic birds. It smelled of dogs and other furry creatures brought in on approval but stayed permanently. We, on the other hand, didn’t even own a quiet and aloof cat to wander off and claim someone else’s lawn.

Fred’s pitch to Haiden about reaching higher because of being a college graduate shot through Haiden like a bolt of electricity. His eyes lighted up; his body straightened; his jaw line jutted out with determination. The next thing I knew, my husband had enrolled in

college for a Master's Degree in Marketing. Was I shocked? Of course I was shocked. The wind was knocked out of me. But even more significant was the fact that he had not consulted with me. He ran right over me. Not consulting with me hurt my feelings deeply. All right, all right, Rhea, I told myself; he made a mistake; you'll get over it. But it was difficult. He had registered for two more years of college, and told me after he had done it. Where was our partnership? What was his plan? And again what about MY turn?

"My professors respect me," he said. "I should have been treated with such respect at the brokerage."

At the brokerage! Oooh! Haiden had never uttered a word. So, now I learned that it had not been a good fit; he had not been treated well. This information cannonballed into the air and I understood. He had been hurt, even damaged. I calmed down and accepted my station. I would remain the sole household earner for a while longer. "We have come this far," Haiden said, stroking my hair and consoling me. "It's only a two-year program."

I was glad we owned the house. It appeased me as some kind of stability while Haiden shifted into forward motion. Annie appeased me even more when one evening she invited me to tag along with her while she registered for extension classes at the nearby college. "Rhea, the place is a smorgasbord. And have I got an appetite. I never know what to take first, so I take everything: painting, pottery, horticulture. I stuff myself."

"I will take a class," I mumbled, "at night."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A class in romantic literature."

"I always suspected you of being a romantic, Rhea."

8

During the next two years while Haiden was in graduate school, the Potters were his booster team, especially Fred.

"You're going to be rich, you two," said Fred.

"Maybe so, Fred; maybe so!" said Haiden laughing.

"Sure; I'm reading all the time about those students who have a Master of Business Administration degree, an MBA, being snapped up so quickly for employment that they barely interview before final examinations."

Haiden said, "I have high expectations," looking into his new floor-length mirror at his new suit.

"So what kind of position are you going to look for, old man, when you graduate?" said Fred.

"I will become a captain of industry," retorted Haiden, admiring his slim waistline.

"I mean what will be your field of interest?"

"I told you: Captain."

"That's the way, Haiden," Fred laughed.

9

At the end of the two-year MBA program, an economic slowdown descended, even for the MBA recipients who were the most self-confident and self-assured group. These students had expected to harness creative, powerful jobs that promised easy paths to promotion and quick riches. But many of the companies announced job cuts and hiring freezes. Even the graduates at the higher-ranked business schools, those who felt they were in the driver's seat, even those

graduates were facing a tight labor market, so imagine the greater sting for students at the lowered-ranked schools such as the kind Haiden Stoakes attended.

“Listen to this,” said Haiden at the breakfast table while holding his finger on the line of print: ‘The students who spent their summers in small jobs and believed they could shop around or even job hop until they found an ideal post are lowering their expectations and are accepting fulltime positions with their summer employers.’” Haiden slapped at the newspaper. “Who wants to work their academic tail off for two years, and then after graduation find themselves, at best, in charge of a —of a refreshment stand?”

He had already absorbed articles about the “White-Collar Sweatshop” and the “Return of the Crummy Job”. And a colleague had recently said to Haiden, “Well, it was a beautiful thing to believe for a few years that anything was possible, that we could all hold wonderful jobs and succeed without being robotic cogs in the corporate wheel. Those days are over for us.”

The effect on Haiden’s attitude was one he sounded from his mountaintop. “Let the companies sell themselves to me.”

After graduation with an MBA, he sent out his resume to different companies, seeking the perfect fit, demanding it. I realized his expectations were restricting him, that he took an intractable position. In his mind, his stance was thoroughly justified. This is not to say he wasn’t offered employment. On the contrary, he was offered a position with every company where he interviewed. He was an attractive man with an attractive way of speaking. But his resume could not disguise the fact that Haiden was employed for five years at Boxer and Boxer with an unspectacular sales record. So despite holding an MBA, he was offered only entry-level positions.

Haiden resented these offerings.

“After what I have been through, all that college, I’m not about to start my career at the entry level. I refuse.”

“Does it matter, Haiden?” I urged. “Soon enough you will rise up in any company.”

“Of course it matters,” he said, huffing and puffing. “There’s a principle involved here.”

Maybe he knew better than I in the arcane ways of the business world. I was a mere secretary with limited exposure. So I waited. What else could I do? I continued to provide the household paychecks. At the end of each day I returned home from the office, set down my purse on my desk that stood opposite to Haiden’s desk, and I saw the classified ads spread out all over his desk as well as a record he kept of letters he had sent out and letters of rejection he received. On the weekends, I was home to see him studying and answering the internet advertisements for employment. Certainly, I concluded, the man was busy for many hours each day at his search. He was trying. But, nevertheless, I puzzled over the situation.

Haiden began catering to me with little attentions. He dusted the windshield of my car every morning along with his own; he brewed coffee and prepared my breakfast; at the end of the day as soon as Haiden heard the motor from my car pulling into the garage, he sprang into action mixing cocktails and setting them on the coffee table. In a marriage, all these little attentions are acts of love.

In time, Haiden’s handle on cooking became major in his life. He took over the kitchen completely, reorganized it just to his liking, and snapped in anger if I tried to rearrange anything. The dinner table was always set attractively when I came home from work, with a bottle of wine and even candlelight. His roasts and chickens improved

with time, as well as his long simmering soups. He began to prepare crepes and souffles.

Even so, more time passed, and he remained unemployed. What was he doing all day? He seemed to find small pleasures in self-induced routines. He chatted with neighbors during brisk morning walks, and observed the humor of dogs as they look up into his eyes; he visited the produce section of the market early in the morning and the fish market and imagined himself alongside the great chefs selecting the freshest items of the day. He once pondered aloud the possibility of becoming a chef. And from this I knew he hadn't given up; he was still searching for his exceptionalism.

He began to spend more of his time at the church, as in the days when I first met him. He came home preaching about rampant moral decay in our society; and this became his stock and trade conversation. As a member of the Social Action Committee at our church, he spoke in front of a microphone for every good cause. He collected food for the needy, delivered meals to the sick, mailed letters for local politicians. . . and I didn't know what to think because he wasn't finding employment.

I began to identify with my mother. She had demonstrated a new kind of strength when my father had his debilitating stroke; she had risen to become the matriarch of our family to discharge my father's debts. My mother and I were now the providers, even though in my case it was temporary, I hoped. I was so much younger than my mother; I had enthusiasm and interest to do things like take more classes and write fiction. But not my mother. She was much older. When she finished my father's business, she simply acceded into a kind of retirement that I found frightening. She had spent so many of her years catering to my father, that now she believed herself

unprepared, or should I say unqualified, or maybe beyond having any interest in doing anything but visiting him daily at the retirement facility. Would her fate be my fate when I finally had the opportunity to take more classes and write? Would it be too late for me? Would the time come when all that remained for me was to take care of my mother in her last days and my life had been sacrificed? That life was beginning to take shape. I witnessed my mother boarding at the facility to be near my father.

10

As time wore on, Haiden manifested an —what shall I call it?— an obsession. It was such an absurd thing and Haiden drove me so crazy with it that I sometimes wished it were actually true. It was this: he became suspicious of other men who paid attention to me. Before we were married, he flattered me with his hovering attention, with chivalric protectiveness, saying that he was unworthy of me; however, by the time he completed graduate school, he had made a turn-about. He demanded that all of my attention belonged to him, that anyone who prevented me from worshipping him was the enemy, a detractor. I could not understand his motivation. His obsession manifested itself one evening when I came home from my secretarial position in the accounting firm, tired and hungry, and a little later than usual. Haiden stopped his cooking and began to ask me a battery of questions. “Why were you late?” “Did your employer not realize a husband was waiting at home?” “That dinner would be ruined? As the months wore on, he asked, “Were there any new employees in the office?” “Of which sex?” The more questions he asked, the more reluctantly I answered him, until finally I stopped talking altogether and left the

room. And then he would shout after me something that ended with, “Remember the sanctity of marriage.” That word, “sanctity,” began to appear often in Haiden’s stentorious home orations, saying as much as, “Marriage is a religion.”

Eventually I asked, “How is it a religion?”

He looked at me for a long time. Then he took me on his knee as if I were a child and said quietly, “Marriage is holy; it possesses an inviolability. A husband and wife commit to their marriage for better or worse.”

“Yes, that is the rule,” I said. “I, too, believe in the sanctity of marriage.”

“And if either of the two parties breaks the rule, as in the Garden of Eden, Satan enters,” he said that just as my mother would have said it.

I never knew when Haiden’s obsession would overtake him. Anything could set him off: my staying late at the office during tax season, a new perfume, a new pair of earrings. On several occasions, he telephoned the office during the noon hour; staff members could hear him shouting. “What do you mean she stepped out of the office? It’s lunchtime; people eat lunch in the office at lunchtime. Did she go out alone? Who was with her? Where did they go? Is that other employee a female or male? employer?” And whenever the answer was a male employee or more specifically my employer, Haiden would slam down the receiver.

I told Haiden my employer provided not only food in our mouths but medical insurance and a dental plan, and that Haiden’s suspicions were unfounded. Nevertheless, Haiden adhered to the idea that I was unfaithful. In so doing, he became the violated spouse who was so injured that he need not defend his unemployment because what I

was doing was so much worse.. I was now officially the breadwinner but he would incriminate me every chance he could, so that whatever he did or did not do was not as bad as my unfaithfulness.

Mr. Hegi worked more hours during tax season, and he paid me extra for working those hours alongside him. Mr. Hegi appreciated my extra effort because, in addition to the extra pay, he gave me very beautiful gifts. And when Mr. Hegi retired, my new boss, Mr. Valentine, was even more magnanimous. That first year Mr. Valentine gave me a pearl bracelet, and Haiden said it looked like a gift from a lover and ordered me to return it. I refused because it was the finest piece of jewelry I owned. Haiden and I argued at length, but I never gave up that pearl bracelet. I wear it every day; it reminds me of Mr. Valentine.

While I worked diligently at the office to support the two of us, my husband spent his daytime hours with his friends (mostly retired men and old women) not only at the church but also at the coffee house across the street from the church discussing the injustices of society. I came home each evening to a husband wearing one of my aprons, bustling over the stove, having a wonderful time. He hummed and syncopated his body to radio music, he even danced. He was so jolly and talkative, his voice booming and resonating off the walls, that sometimes when he sang and even whistled, I joined in, for it was infectious. But in time I was simultaneously hearing an undercurrent of negative thoughts in my own head. I looked for ways to stay at work as long as possible. At home, I began to avoid Haiden’s eyes. I became quiet and preoccupied. Or I went out at night with Annabelle to the college to my literature class and tried to forget all about my husband.

When Haiden and I were home together in the living room after dinner, he read his newspaper and I curled up and sank deep into my books and reveries. Periodically Haiden would slap the pages and comment loudly on the sad state of the world. I started to go to bed earlier.

11

"So tell me more about your new boss. I like his name: Mr. Valentine," said Annabelle.

"He entered the accounting firm like a ray of sunshine," I said.

"And you needed some sunshine. Your shoulders don't sag when you talk about this gentleman."

"Did I tell you, for my birthday he brought his violin to the office and performed for me. Of course he started with the Happy Birthday song and made me laugh, but he moved on to some Brahms and Mendelssohn and I cried." I pressed my hand against my heart. "Mr. Valentine took me out for a birthday lunch to his favorite Italian restaurant. He ordered a bottle of wine. Well, later, past the halfway mark of the bottle, we both ordered huge plates of spaghetti with meatballs. We told the waiter to leave the sprinkling container of Parmesan cheese on the table. Then Mr. Valentine and I sprinkled away, sprinkled back and forth, and finally we sprinkled each other. How wonderfully silly we were! I don't know what came over me, but I felt so—well, I felt younger. That's when I realized Mr. Valentine and I were about the same age." With a lingering smile I looked off, holding the scene of that silliness, and suddenly said, "Haiden never misbehaves like that. Annie, I want to tell you something."

"That you're having an affair with Mr. Valentine?"

“No, no. Of course not. I confide in him.”

“Then it’s about not knowing how much longer you can go on like this—childless?” she said.

Good old Annabelle. A child was not one of the offerings in her destiny. She tried to clutter up her life in order to fill that empty space. She was available at the drop of a hat to go anywhere and do anything. In its wake, she left her menagerie of unfinished projects strewn throughout her house, stepping over whatever blocked foot traffic: her mosaic tile tables only half finished, her potter’s wheel grown dusty, chairs partially reupholstered and abandoned, a weaver’s loom holding its multi-colored blanket into perpetuity—all, all, all the result of night school classes and a willingness to drop everything in pursuit of something else. In her yard lay dead flowerbeds with replacements sitting interminably in flat trays, and the beginning of a pond for koi fish but so far struggling only with a single lily pad. To compound the situation, Annabelle and Fred’s house ran amuck with aquariums and cages. Their dogs, tout de suite, jumped on everyone coming through the door, then clamored for attention with wet rubber toys dragged forward and deposited into our lap. Annabelle and Fred brought home creatures from the store on trial. However, everything from the store that entered the house remained in the house, glorifying an abandonment to toys and play. Our home, Haiden’s and mine, was in shocking contrast. It was an exhibit of neatness and order, of containment. In our house that was now chiefly Haiden’s domain, he assigned every object its place, from shelf to shelf, corner to corner, drawer to drawer.

And yet, while our two households were in complete contrast, which reflected the gaping dissimilarity between Annabelle and myself, we two women were similar in one very distinctive way:

neither one of us had produced children. And that was enough to bond us in a neighborhood where other households embraced parenthood, were consumed by it, overwhelmed by it, glorified because of it. The adults within those households left Annabelle and me outside their doors. We felt whispered about as “those poor women,” and when we approached the mothers clustered and chatting about their carpools and school projects, we sensed that their feet shifted in place and their conversation quickly changed. The language of motherhood was a coded language, and we did not qualify. As they joined together in the center of their social order, we hung along the edges. Annabelle and I gravitated toward each other for survival. Barren-ness was our commonality. It was more serious for Annabelle than for me because she and Fred said they wanted children. Haiden did not want children. He told me so. Therefore I thought I did not want children. I believed husband and wife should think alike. But what about my feelings in my heart of hearts? Was something was wrong with me?

“Don’t talk to me like that. You’re imagining things. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Well, if there was nothing wrong with me, there was something wrong with Haiden. He suddenly developed severe high blood pressure and the doctor warned us of the seriousness of such a condition. From then on, Haiden took all kinds of pills, and he made a great flourish of it, a ceremony. He brought his pills to the table in an elegant relish dish shaped like a tiny carriage drawn by two glass horses that he specifically looked for in an antique shop to assist him. When he tilted his head back, dropped each pill into his mouth, one by one, I knew that never again would he try to find employment. He made it perfectly clear by the prominent, even flamboyant display of so many colorful pills that he had become an invalid.

"A brave front is the most honorable way to conduct one's life," he declared. "To carry on, as always." And he was very good at it. An outsider would never have known he was an invalid. He presided at the head of our little dinner table as if he were the one responsible for our bounty. Proudly he gave grace over what we were about to receive, and then proceeded with passages from the Bible full of high principles, always including his favorite passage from Ecclesiastes about the vanity of man: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind." Yes, Haiden was content with his lot.

One night he added another passage in Ecclesiastes: "For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy; but to the sinner he gives the toil of gathering and heaping." Suddenly I realized Haiden's philosophy: He pleased God and therefore need not toil; but I did not please God and was given to gathering and heaping.

When he finished his dinner sermon, he would ask me if anything interesting occurred at the office that day, and I would mumble, "Nothing," and he would say, "Oh, come now!"

"Nothing interesting," I would repeat.

"He's a very attractive man," said Haiden.

"Really?"

"What are you talking about?" I would say.

Haiden was right: Mr. Valentine was very attractive—handsome. I had realized it the first time I saw him.

"And you enjoy his company," said Haiden.

"He's my employer."

Haiden would grumble something, then move on to reenact his daily conversation that he held with his cronies at the coffee shop. "They were telling me again, 'Haiden, with your religious fervor and

your concern for society, you should be a leader in the community.' And I'd slap my knee, 'That's exactly what I tell myself.'" Haiden laughed and laughed. "But I have to be a follower first. That's the hard part," he would add, looking at me. And he'd wink as he continued to relate the scene. "'Charisma,' one old timer called it. 'By God, you even have the good looks to go along. You should be the mayor.'" Haiden roared with delight. "The mayor, imagine!"

But nothing ever came of these reenactions; they never materialized into anything. "Why don't you do something about it?" I would say. Haiden would shake his head, serve the food with a flourish of movement, proud of his cooking and say, "When I cook, I'm accomplishing something." On the other hand, since I myself was never much of a cook, it was a good thing Haiden enjoyed the kitchen so much.

My husband liked a well-run household. He raised his voice, actually became incensed whenever he found the last box of tissues or last clean fork. "We must always take stock. It's the same as running a business, Rhea!"

12

Haiden wore an apron when my parents came to dinner. My mother drove my father from the retirement home, and led him into the house without his wheelchair; it was an ordeal for my father to walk but he never complained. When he had scolded his sons-in-law, he learned that complaining was a useless activity. His fate was sealed. He could not control anything any more. My mother would invariably start the

conversation by saying, “Rhea, are you enjoying your English class?” while both of my parents stared at Haiden bringing in the platters.

“I would like to take more than one course,” I blurted out this time.

“A woman’s place is-is-is . . ,” stuttered my father slowly with a twisted mouth.

My mother added, “You must protect the sanctity of your marriage. That is God’s first law. Remember, it is the wife who keeps the peace in the hearth and home.” Then she blinked and sat up tall. My father reached for her hand, and patted it with approval.

My father rarely said anything after his stroke. He had always been a silent gruff man, not forthcoming on any subject except business. He was now mainly interested in his three meals a day.

Haiden said grace and served up a quotation from the Bible. When we started to eat, he added an inspirational poem, followed with a humorous piece from the newspaper, and wound up with a long editorial on the corruptions rampant in the land. He had spent the entire day preparing for the occasion. In reciting his program, he left little space for anyone else to talk.

Soon after dinner, my mother rose up from her seat at the table, complimented Haiden on his cook

ing, kissed me on the cheek while my father grumbled inarticulately and sat up straight. Mother drove my father back to the retirement facility. I assumed their attitude about us was that for better or worse our marriage was intact. I helped Haiden clear the dishes from the table. He would save the leftovers, packing mine in a brown paper bag for my lunch at the office.

When my father stopped talking altogether, my mother no longer drove him to our house for dinner. She was already boarding at the facility with a second bed wheeled into his room. They slept side by side. She would be there to comfort him when he woke up in the middle of the night and didn't know where he was. The day arrived when he no longer recognized her, and I knew my mother would pass away soon after my father did. Her job was done.

I said to Carlotta, "Mother sacrificed her life for Dad."

"She looked hard at me and said, "Do you approve of that?"

"Approve? She felt she did the best she could."

"But what was she like in the beginning of their marriage?" Carlotta asked me and then proceeded to answer her own question.

"She was formed enough. she was a romantic, I am certain. Dad bamboozled her the same way he bamboozled all of us."

"Why are you saying all this to me? Are you trying to warn me?"

"Yes."

"Haiden is a different kind of man than Dad. And I am a different kind of woman than Mother."

"Do you really believe that?"

13

Haiden's high blood pressure mixed, boiled, and bubbled with his obsession. It was during tax season that the incident occurred. I had stayed at the office later than ever. Of course I told Haiden several times that I would be working late. Haiden called anyway. He must have held dinner for a while despite my words, as he so often did to torture himself, then eventually went ahead and ate by himself, washed his dinner dishes, and put away the untouched food. The

kitchen was antiseptically clean by the time he hung up the towel and turned off the light. But on this particular night he actually drove to Mr. Valentine's office with his head spinning.

Every year I told him that during tax season the office extended its working hours. Nevertheless Haiden stirred his caldron and brewed his suspicions. So on this particular night he arrived at the office and came through the door unannounced and unexpected. He simply appeared in the doorway. Mr. Valentine and I were the only people in the office. Haiden shocked us, and the expressions on our faces revealed, to Haiden's way of thinking, undeniable guilt.

I realized what was happening. I felt sorry for him in his anguish. He turned red, raised his hand like Moses with his staff before the people of Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and shrieked, "This is an abomination before God." He lurched forward, and before Mr. Valentine could say anything, Haiden yanked me out of my chair and out the door, out the building, shoved me into the car, jumped into the driver's seat, and pressed his foot so hard against the gas pedal that when he sped off for just one block, he lost control and ran straight into a brick wall.

I was all right, but Haiden was hospitalized for three months. I returned home that night to silence. I came through the front door and broke down crying hysterically. But I wasn't sure of the reason I was crying.

The day I drove Haiden home from the hospital, I felt a sudden pulsing of hot blood roar through one-half of my head, lodging in my eye, ear, and cheek. It did not pass. It was ongoing pain. And from then on, periodically, through the rest of that year, these episodes came with no accounting. Each time, I looked around for the cause: food, an allergy, even a vitamin deficiency. Finally considering the

possibility of an early female change of life, I visited my doctor and underwent a physical examination. But in the end, both the doctor and I remained utterly baffled. “Such is the nature of migraines,” he said.

And so I learned what a migraine was.

During each episode I told Haiden to keep his distance.

But I was forever looking around for the cause. I pounced on any small thing, any inconsequential petty, trivial thing, only to discard it a few moments later. Apparently the wild spirit that my parents had warned me against had lain dormant all these years like a spore, until the conditions were right and then erupted. These migraines started after that car accident but nothing else had changed in my life; in fact, the status quo had long become entrenched; it had sunk into cement. Maybe the sublimation of my wild spirit was the problem.

“You seem depressed,” said. Mr. Valentine one morning as I sat in his office.

“It’s one of my migraines,” I said.

“I’m concerned about you, Rhea. Frankly, I think you should take a vacation.”

I shook my head and walked out of his office and returned to my desk.

I typed reports all that morning. My fingers pounded on the keys as the kick of a mule butted against my left temple, from the inside out, paralyzing the left half of my face. I remained at my desk during lunch.

In the afternoon, I typed. The glare off the computer screen aggravated me. The pain from the mule’s kick by now stretched down

my neck to my shoulder. The colors of the computer screen changed from black to sepia, and not all the words were readable. The left half of the screen disappeared. Was it stress?

14

How often had I explained to Annabelle that she should not call me at the office except for seriously important matters! But that created a problem for her because she was incapable of distinguishing between what was seriously important from what was not. She was always in earnest. She called me any time. And there I sat, at my desk, listening to her excitement over the smallest things, her breathlessness at trying to catch all of life, and her dizziness at not being able to manage any of it. Stress? I sat at my desk year after year typing out hundreds of tax reports for my employer, Mr. Valentine, with a bleariness to the soul that I believed was annihilating me. Therefore, ashamedly, on Mr. Valentine's time, this time I honestly welcomed her calls. She woke me out of my stupor, resuscitated me, and made me laugh. "You'll never guess, so I'll tell you," and she did.

"I signed up for a novels workshop at the college. I'm going to write a novel," she said. "They say there is a book in everyone."

"You're going to write a novel? You?" My sweet upside-down, every-which-way, headlong rush of a girlfriend, who read no more than two books a year, had enrolled in an extension class at the college and was going to write a novel?!?!? She had dared to step foot inside the one area I revered and deified, held sacred, where I myself felt unworthy to step foot, where I lay prone before the sacred altar, a worshipping disciple who felt too humble to lift my head and look into the eye of the oracle.

"That's right. Tuesday and Thursday mornings from nine to twelve noon."

"Say that again," I gasped in a voice so soft that it surprised me.

"What's wrong with the phone, Rhea; can't you hear me?"

I dropped the telephone on the desk and stared at it, at Annie's little squeaky voice coming out of the holes in the receiver: "The class is filled up with lots of older people. . . ." I backed away, halfway falling against Haiden's photograph. I ran out of my office and burst straight into Mr. Valentine's office. He was talking on the telephone, but when he saw me he hung up the receiver.

I flung myself into a chair and doubled up sobbing, burying my face in my hands.

"Rhea, are you hurt? Did someone hurt you?"

I suddenly stopped crying and looked up, "Hurt?" squinting as if the daylight had blinded me.

"Should I call for someone?" he asked.

"Annie. My friend Annie," I looked up through what was now a fresh rush of sobs and pointed backward at the telephone on my desk, "has dared to—where I myself," I pounded on my chest, "would never dream of entering. Annie, who has tried everything and succeeded at nothing, and is too scatter-brained to know any better—" I shook my head and buried my face again. Then I screamed out, "Now she's going to write a novel while I continue to sit at that desk out there." I was pointing, pointing, "typing those-those-those tax reports. Do you have any idea—? For God's sake—"

"I understand you," he said softly.

"The class is held on Tuesday and Thursday mornings," I burst out.

“I see,” he said.

“My husband is almost an invalid.”

“Almost?”

“I can’t budge him.” I jumped up. “Tuesday and Thursday mornings, Mr. Valentine.” I held my head. “Mr. Valentine! You must help me. Please, help me.” I collapsed on the floor.

He scooped me up and carried me to the sofa. Then he sat down beside me. Slipping his arm around my shoulder, he tilted my head against his shoulder. “Sh, sh, sh. Be very quiet and listen to me.”

And so he began in the softest, most tender voice. “You own a nice home, right?”

“Yes.” I was trying to catch my breath.

“If you sell it—”

“But,” I panted.

“Sh, sh, sh. If you sell it and buy a cheaper house—”

“But—”

“Listen to me. If you buy an old house, probably near a college, an old house with lots of rooms, you easily can rent out some of the rooms. You can live off the rentals.”

I stopped my sobbing. I listened. “What if we have vacancies? We’re sure to have vacancies.”

“A place near a college. You will never run out of students. Maybe that college where you friend is taking her novels workshop.

I looked up with my wet, red face, and bloodshot eyes.

“You will have an income,” he went on. “Modest, but enough so that you can stay home, and on Tuesdays and Thursday mornings you can saunter off to your novels workshop.”

I blinked. And the joy of the solution began to spurt out of me, awkward and jagged, like water rushing through dry, clogged riverbeds.

“Why are you crying? Will your husband cause trouble over this?”

I fell into Mr. Valentine’s arms and muffled my sobbing: “You saved my life.

15

While driving home after that day from the office, I remembered Haiden never liked surprises. I steered slowly, wondering how I was going to tell him. I turned into our driveway. With the envelope containing my final paycheck held firmly between two fingers, I walked into Haiden’s opulent study where he sat at his desk hovering over his well-worn New Testament used for the essays he delivered in front of the Social Action Committee. He did not look up as I entered. His silver desk accessories, which he polished regularly, shone from the light of his Tiffany lamp. A glass bowl was filled with fresh-cut flowers from our little rose garden. He continued to write: his expensive fountain pen scratched away making the sound of a cat sharpening its claws.

“Haiden!” I leaned over and set my final paycheck in front of him. “I quit today.”

He stopped writing. He placed his finger on the line in the book. He sat back. “I have had an influence after all, even if it took the severity of my accident to bring you to the realization that Mr. Valentine is interested in you personally. Undoubtedly, Mr. Valentine

gave you an excellent letter of recommendation for your time of devoted service."

"I not only quit, Haiden. I retired."

He finger yet held its place. He looked up and stared at me. "Go on."

"Mr. Valentine and I shook hands, and he wished me good luck. Today, Haiden, I am beginning my new career." I was shaking as I explained Mr. Valentine's idea.

Haiden sat back. "Very enterprising of him."

"Enterprising of him. You mean of me."

"Well then, of both of you. Mr. Valentine likes you very much."

"Yes, we are friends."

"Friends? Hah! The man is in love with you."

I thought to myself, If only that were true. But I knew my husband was speaking through his paranoiac suspicions.

Each month, Haiden withdrew from our checking account one-hundred-fifty dollars for his personal expenditures. With it he paid for his haircuts, his manicures, his colognes, his sundries. My retirement destabilized his comfortable lifestyle. "Don't you think you jumped the gun a bit?" he said. "At present we have no income at all."

I was forcing him out into the world. I expected to hear his discomfort in the form of innumerable sighs and head shakings. He pushed my final paycheck aside and returned to his writing. I scooped up the check and walked toward the door. From behind me, he suddenly turned on his Tiffany lamp and said, "Please shut off the light as you leave the room. We must watch our pennies now."

I had not expected my idea to misfire. But it did. For the rest of the day, he conducted a running commentary of resentment on my

decision: “Rhea, you left the light on again in the closet. We must watch our electric bill.” “Rhea, please cover the milk and return it to the refrigerator before it sours. We do not waste food in this house.” “Rhea, I suggest we develop a taste for bread pudding to use up our old bread.”

That night I suffered through a nightmare:

> In a large noisy room, my parents were socializing with all kinds of relatives and friends. I entered the room and called out loudly to them, attempting to make my announcement. They ignored me. I raised my voice; I hollered. They refused to listen to me. Then I tried walking over to my parents, but they turned their backs to me. They went on talking and talking and talking to the others over my voice, purposely drowning me out.

I woke up hot and breathing fast. My clothes were wet.

16

At breakfast, “Haiden, I want to call a realtor.”

“Why?”

He acted as if he had never heard me speak of Mr. Valentine’s idea, as if it had been an idiot’s delight and nothing more. But I was determined. Firmly I repeated the plan. “I am going to follow Mr. Valentine’s idea. We trade this house for an old and cheaper one that has lots of rooms; we rent out the rooms to college students and create a source of income. Then I can attend college and take the

novels workshop alongside Annabelle on Tuesday and Thursday mornings."

Haiden spread marmalade on his toast, continued eating in silence, finished his breakfast, and walked out of the room.

"I want to visit a realtor—with you," I called loudly after him. "I want your support."

That night, I climbed into bed and propped up my pillow next to Haiden as he sat up reading. "Haiden, may I talk with you?"

He set his book down perfunctorily, open-faced on his lap, folded his hands over it, and looked straight ahead.

"I really do think such a plan would work," I said.

"Yes you do." He leaned toward his night table where his glass of water stood, opened the single small drawer and withdrew a bottle of sleeping pills. I don't recall when he started taking sleeping pills. He gulped down a pill with water and turned off his lamp. In the dark he uttered, "We must put this idea in its proper place, just as we finally did with your plan for Europe." He lay down on his side and with a single movement pulled the covers over his shoulder.

Unfortunately for me, Europe had never been on Haiden's dream list. For years, I had talked about the day we could save up enough money to visit Europe; but Haiden said Europe was a dirty place; there were pickpockets and bad food, and rampant promiscuity. He said the men flaunted their mistresses, and thought nothing wrong with living in sin. "We are not going to penny-pinch for an entire year for some far-off, short-lived trip which undoubtedly will be abysmally and abominably uncomfortable, and filthy with beggars."

Nevertheless, I believed, really hoped, in time Haiden would come around because he knew I wanted it so much. Yes, once he gained employment after graduating college, he would be open to the

subject of Europe. But even then, Haiden was unyielding. “I am flatly not in favor of uprooting our comfortable lifestyle. It is daily life that matters, Rhea.”

The morning after I retired and presented Mr. Valentine’s idea about selling the house, Haiden remained silent at the breakfast table. He concentrated on his breakfast, taking his usual great pleasure in the luxuries of a slow and easy breakfast, verbalizing the benefits to the digestive system. I watched him and waited for the right moment to re-open the subject. But as soon as he finished his breakfast, he rose up from the table, took his coffee cup and saucer to the kitchen sink when I called after him, "Haiden, why shouldn’t we sell this house and buy another? A cheaper one with extra rooms to rent out? The rentals would be our livelihood. Then I, too, could—”

He turned around, glared at me for a moment, and shot out, “You buy it!”

I winced.

Then he pivoted and left the room.

You buy it? You buy it? This from a man who was in the real estate business, and was going to open his own firm, Haiden Stoakes and Company? You buy it? I was off balance and hurt.

He had flung the idea back in my face. It was clear to me that he thought the idea was ridiculous. He did not want me to go ahead; that was clear. You buy it? I sat there in a cavernous silence. If only a noisy clock were tick-tocking on the kitchen wall I could find relief in its sound. But all I heard were my own thoughts and I did not like them. Whenever I was insecure in our relationship, I reached for Haiden’s side to understand his position. It always worked. And now I proceeded to do exactly that. I thought: Maybe he truly wants me to go ahead with the project, do some preliminary footwork. When I

present several houses for him to consider, he will jump in and take over the project.

17

“It’s a gloomy old house,” said Mr. Smith, the real estate man, as we drove up. "A neglected black sheep of a house,” he admitted as there was no way of avoiding the truth. A tall hedge almost hid the porch. From the porch out to the sidewalk ran not a lawn but bare soil with clumps of wild grass and weeds.

“Oh my! Such distress!” I said.

“That’s why it’s so cheap. Funny thing about neighborhoods,” he said. “Certain houses seem continually turning over to new owners. They sprout For Sale signs again and again. Sometimes corner houses turn over more often than others because the owners don’t feel like part of the neighborhood. Sometimes the new owners simply don’t like their neighbors. Or sometimes the new owners, a hopeful couple, bring to the house something that had soured long before in their marriage and they were to learn was beyond sweetening.” He looked at me from beneath dark concerned brows, questioning if ours was also a sour case. I wondered with a pretended casualness if he had guessed my situation with Haiden. Mr. Smith was a handsome man, almost as handsome as Haiden, but not as handsome as Mr. Valentine.

“Maybe there’s something wrong with the DNA of the house,” he went on.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Something in its energy, its Feng Shui. Perhaps the light coming through the windows is wrong, the doorways are located in

bad places, the walls don't welcome the furniture properly. Feng Shui. Perhaps the couple who buy the house are not entirely happy and hope the new environment will help them." Had Mr. Smith just stepped across his realtor/client boundary? Had he had invaded my privacy?

We walked through the house together. It was narrow and deep, a long house with many rooms, like one of those shotgun houses in New Orleans. It was a deceptively larger house than it appeared from the front. I said, "Mr. Smith, I want to tell you my plan."

"Let's go sit out on the front porch." He took my arm.

We stepped outdoors onto the deep porch and sat on the hammock left by the previous owners. Mr. Smith assured me that rentals would be forthcoming, that my plan was do-able. I watched the silken fringe of the canopy sway and felt hopeful. "The last couple saw or brought such negative Feng Shui that they fled soon after with bad memories and an ugly divorce. They did not let the house actually work for them. The vines are growing over this outdoor furniture probably because the couple in their emotional discord had never come out here together to discover this is a holy citadel of contemplation and rejuvenation."

I ran my hand loosely across the overhanging fringe of the hammock and then with my eyes half closing I breathed in the surrounding fragrances. We sat and rocked. We listened to the creaking of the chains. "Mr. Smith, these old-fashioned porches up and down the street are full of the echoes of conversations shared by polite people in a more polite age. People with names like Hortense and Clarissa and Theodora; names like Waldo and Ulysses and Ambrose."

He laughed and threw his head back. "I don't doubt it."

I went on. “They sat out here on hot summer days drinking pitchers of cold lemonade—the men in their buttoned-up shirts and ties, fanning themselves with their light-weight woven hats; the women occasionally dotting their powdered cheeks with embroidered handkerchiefs. Rocking back and forth, back and forth. These people spoke carefully of Great Uncle Willie’s eccentricities and Great Grandmother Gertrude’s hush-hush drinking problem. These were people who kept secrets.”

“Mrs. Stoakes, you sound like a writer.” Then he added, “Mrs. Stoakes, you are going to buy this house.”

Haiden was altogether quiet about the house. When I suggested we drive over to see it, he never budged from his chair.

When Mr. Smith came to our house with the paperwork, I shoved the deed of trust for the first house toward Haiden who never even looked at it. He never signed it, but shoved it back towards me, and said, “We are to take in boarders. And will I be the housekeeper for all these borders? Will I

for them and wipe their behinds?” He stormed out of the room and left the house.

I stared at Mr. Smith and he stared back at me. He held up the title papers, asking, “What would you like to do at this point?”

“What are my options?”

“You could sign the papers in your name only.”

PART II

18

The moving men glanced down at the schematic of the floor plan, then up at the dark clouds, rolled their eyes, and let out a whistle. That whistle must have set off a signal heard only in the sensitive ears of neighborhood children who suddenly came racing along the sidewalk on tricycles and roller skates right up to the truck, and stopped abruptly behind an invisible chalk line to watch. In silence, these little spectators waited for signs of children's things. They were disappointed.

The bed was the first piece of furniture carried in. Haiden, being a tall man, required a large bed. In a novel, the bed's early appearance would have called attention to certain sexual proclivities. In our case, once Haiden stayed home, the bed was strictly for sleeping. I even received the message that he preferred separate beds. Whenever I brought up the subject of children, Haiden simply looked at me without uttering a word. We had become a celibate couple.

The neighborhood children waited patiently, but eventually without seeing evidence of child life they grabbed their handlebars, honked their little rubber horns, and pedaled away.

"You must like old things, Miss." I turned around. The mailman hiked up the leather pouch over his shoulder and began a narration fit for a tour guide. "This neighborhood has been old ever since I can remember, and I've been walking Perdue Street for thirty years." He appeared to be about seventy years old, baked brown and weathered by his outdoor occupation, and he leaned into an angle with one foot bearing most of the weight of his mailbag. "The porches have always

drawn attention. Houses built today don’t have porches like these. They’re like extra rooms.”

“The neighborhood is charming,” I answered, listening to the children honking far away down the sidewalk.

“It’s the porches,” he affirmed. "It's the porches that are charming. People buy the houses because of the porches. They don't buy the houses because of the houses. The houses are just old."

A human shout blasted at us from my left. “The houses may be old, but they’re still here.” Coming toward us was a tall bony old lady carrying a covered plate in her hands. An offering of welcome, no doubt. It was rare to see a woman her age that tall. As she moved, her long bones seemed lost beneath her pink cotton duster. She shouted at the mailman, “And I’m still here, too.”

“Anybody can see that,” he shouted back.

Were they deaf?

“I said the *porches* are charming. *Not* the houses. And certainly not some of the people, for damned sure, if a body can judge present company.”

Then I realized they could hear just fine; these two people simply did not like each other.

"The original people are gone except for me and Celia,” said the old lady facing me. “I’m still here on this side of the street,” pointing to her house next door, “and Celia Vortek is over there, across the street.” She narrowed her eyes and glowered at the house directly across the street. I glanced across the street to a lawn thick with odd grasses born from seeds carried by the wind and birds. Twisting vines clawed the chimney. Two huge shade trees hovered over the house, one trying to hide the house, the other reaching over the single-car driveway. I was captivated with the sight of this tall old

woman. Near the top of her height was her remarkable nose, wonderful and lofty. She jerked her head sideways to peer out that much better from one blue eye at a time. And bouncing around her face, she wore a full regiment of cigarette-shaped curls; a small pink bow nestled in at two o'clock. Finally, vivid lipstick circumvented the contours of her mock smile.

"That's right," the mailman laughed. "You two ladies are still here—even though you avoid speaking to each other."

She lowered her great nose and aimed one eye directly at the mailman. "I don't speak to criminals," she said. "Celia Vortek is a criminal. She stole a man who loved me. She should be in prison." Then she jerked her head, and aimed the other eye at me. "From your house, deary, you will look directly into her living room window and you will see strange things."

The overcast sky suddenly delivered what it had been promising all morning—an unusual summer shower—and the moving men jumped into the front cab of their truck, closed the doors, and waited. The old woman said, "We'll get acquainted later, deary." She was carrying a platter of chocolate-chip cookies covered lightly with a clear wrap. She pursed her lipsticked mouth and continued walking toward the house on the other side of ours, sashaying her long bones under her fresh pink cotton dress.

I glanced at her porch. It housed a single chair and a pair of binoculars lying on the seat, nothing more. It seemed like a lookout post. The mailman said, "If anyone knows about Celia Vortek, I guess she does," shaking his head, laughing as if in exasperation. "You just met Gladys Desiree. You'll hear from her." He pulled down the visor of his cap, and said, "But that's all you're ever going to get from her about Celia. Lord knows I've tried to dig it out. But she keeps things

from me because she thinks it makes her a woman of mystery." He almost laughed while he snapped open his dark blue umbrella, stepped forward with his lead foot, and continued on his slanting way, seemingly oblivious of the downpour.

I dashed indoors for my umbrella and popped it open overhead. I went outside once again and listened to the fine precision taps against the taut fabric. I like the rain; writers do. From the moment I registered for the writer's workshop I had crossed the line; I decided who I was—a writer. I gazed up and down Perdue Street, taking the measure of its somberness on this rainy day. I began to write in my head about these old houses of clapboard, shingles, and river rock, and deep lawns, and massive old shade trees luring onlookers into summertime reveries and winter nocturnes. A person is naturally drawn to these porches. Such enclosures are shelters, havens, hermitages. Whatever they are called, they are sanctums where the mind is protected to ruminate and meander; the soul is in solitude, liberated and expansive. Such porches evoke revelation and enchantment. Children are first to know them as the kingdom of the imagination. Teenagers seek them out as the place for secret interchanges and discoveries. Lovers negotiate here in the late-night hours. Parents sit in the dark and confess their mistakes. Very old people rock here and reflect on their lives and forgive everyone, except themselves. And, for me, new and most compelling of all, my independent spirit is engaged. I will move ahead without Haiden's help.

The clouds parted and the sun came out to eyeball the neighborhood. The movers climbed down from the cab of their truck and resumed their activities, and Gladys Desiree stepped outdoors

from her house on the other side of ours. “I’m glad that pesty mailman is gone. I must watch out for him, my dear.”

“Why is that?”

“He expects favors,” smiling and lifting her eyebrows in that special way women communicate confidences to each other. Then she turned back in the direction of her own house, but instead of proceeding indoors she rather floated into her front garden. No lawn; all garden, an English country garden, choked with assorted flowering plants. She moved along from stepping stone to stepping stone, swishing her long bony hips for the pleasure of some imaginary man just behind her, and brought one shoulder coyly toward her cheek, listening to a charming remark he was whispering in her ear which was about to make her blush. Periodically, she aimed an eye across the street at Celia Vortek’s house, and her expression turned dark. Then she remembered that I was still standing outside watching the movers. “You have some beautiful things,” she shouted, eyeing Haiden’s desk. She came over again and this time grabbed my hand, patted it, and said, “I’m Gladys Desiree. You settle in, deary, and then we’ll have a nice tea party.”

The re-emergence of the sun brought the children out again, peddling fast down the sidewalk on their tricycles, honking their horns and calling their dogs to follow them. “Nuisance!” said Gladys. She and I stepped aside for this traffic line to pass, and then from the house on my right the screen door slammed open. With boundless energy, out dashed a ridiculously handsome man in his mid fifties or maybe older, wearing sunglasses and holding a chocolate-chip cookie between his teeth. A full crop of peroxided blond waves lopped about his forehead as if the man wearing it had just risen from his bed. Blond hair at his age? How old was he? A tropical shirt unbuttoned

almost to the waist revealed a gold chain. I found myself blinking at his unabashed exposure.

Gladys called out to him, “Johnnie, meet our new neighbor, Rhea Stoakes. She bought the house next door.”

With golf clubs swung over one shoulder and each hand gripping a fat suitcase, he called out loudly: “Ladies, I’m off to Hawaii for a couple of months. When I get back, I’ll bring you a pineapple from the Islands. Goodbye; I’m rushing to the airport toward the swaying palms and girls in grass skirts.” He tossed his suitcases and golf clubs into the trunk of his car parked on his driveway and smiled directly at me. “Visit my restaurant, Rhea Stoakes; Remember Trapperman’s; you’ll love the food. It’s in the neighborhood, right across the street from the college. Everybody goes there.” He jumped into his car, and drove off, with one hand out the window waving backward to us.

Gladys let go of my hand and waved to him. “He’s a wild one. Been married three times.”

“Three times?” I shot out too loudly.

“Three times,” she nodded.

So these were my new neighbors. To my left lived Gladys Desiree with a tongue entirely too loose. She did not like children. She showed a frightening disregard for confidentiality, blabbering private information to a complete stranger. She engaged in slander. Her remark concerning this Celia Vortek across the street was slander of the first order. Will I ever trust Gladys with confidential information? Not if I have a brain in my head. And then this Mr.

Johnnie Banghart who lived on the other side of us: Three wives! Such disregard for the sanctity of marriage was completely unacceptable. What kind of values did this man have? Each time he ran up against a problem with his wife, did he simply bail out? If his wife neglected to bring home his shirts from the laundry, or sometimes inadvertently interrupted him while he was speaking, or she tried to develop a little career of her own—did he trade her in? Married people are supposed to talk through their problems; they negotiate their conflicts. Negotiation, that's the answer. Yes, they must talk. But Haiden does not talk. Or I should say, he no longer talks, or when he did talk at one time, it was only about himself.

"Married three times, yes," said Gladys Desiree. "He's a rascal, all right. I just adore that Johnnie Banghart. You will, too; God bless him."

"I'm not sure I approve of three divorces."

"Well, who does, my dear?" She smiled at me. "Who does?"

"But if a person can't manage the first marriage," I said all wise and knowing, "chances are there will be difficulties with any others."

"Aren't you sweet."

19

After several hours, the moving van people drove away and I was left to myself in this old house that had seen better days, fashionable days, expensive days. Glancing over the living room, I found everything too old fashioned: the fireplace with its mustard-colored tiles, a dining room with glass cupboards, hall niches for bric-a-brac. Then I reversed my thinking: Where else in our new price range could we find such detailing? I would explain to Haiden about the

warped floors and doorframes, the cracked bathroom tile, the black chips in the kitchen sink. I would remind him that I paid cash for this house. “No mortgage, Haiden! And cheap rental rates for the nearby college students will provide a regular income for us.”

The ordeal of moving a household usurped the entire day. Haiden avoided me; he spent the day at the church involved with his Social Action Committee. He came home at dinnertime, and was silent. I thought to amuse him and soften him by talking about the neighborhood porches. “I like to think of them as caricatures of their inhabitants.”

“What are you talking about? I understand you less and less these days, since you enrolled in that writers workshop.”

“For example: The owners of those porches with severely clipped vines may be rigid people who sit up straight and eat dull food. There are robust families who treat their porches simply as laughing and gossiping rooms celebrating life. There are the old people’s porches that bear neglected potted plants, mix and match chairs, and flattened pillow seats for circular cats and lazy dogs. There are the relentlessly dark porches, dark as caves; and in them a person can almost hide from view— like the porch is directly across the street—”

Haiden frowned at me. “And you expect to publish your writing?”

An awful silence followed these destructive words, but suddenly, I rose above them for survival. I began to talk to save my soul. I mentioned the mailman who stood on an angle, and then the amazing looking old lady living next door who engaged in coquettish conversations with imaginary men; and finally I mentioned our neighbor on the left side of our house who married three times. I even

mentioned the little children honking up and down the sidewalk on their tricycles; they were so cute. But I concluded with my most sensational tidbit: the alleged criminal living across the street, Celia Vortek.

Haiden lifted his eyebrows facetiously. “What did she do? Murder someone?”

“Apparently, according to our neighbor Gladys Desiree, this Celia Vortek stole a man who loved Gladys. That’s Gladys’ version.”

The next morning Haiden looked up from his newspaper when it started to rain. I looked up from the book review section. “It’s pouring.” Breakfast had ended. We were settled with our second cup of coffee in front of the mustard colored tiles surrounding the fireplace. We sat opposite each other in our reading chairs.

“You will be glad we bought the house, Haiden.”

“You bought it.”

“It’s an investment.”

“This?” he sniffed. “We have demoted ourselves.” He flung down his reading and walked over to the living room window where he pulled back the sheers and looked out. The rain pelted and streaked the glass mercilessly. “I’m going for a drive.”

What! Did I hear correctly? On Saturday morning! Our Saturday morning! We never went out on Saturday morning. Haiden himself had established our routine. We deliberately worked cross-current to most people on this day: we stayed at home. Haiden would say, “Let others gun their motors and set off for a day tangling with the masses, running hither and yon at their errands, fighting crowds, traffic jams, gas fumes; they will be meeting up with distant acquaintances and standing together in tedious interchanges, talking,

talking, talking, while their packages grow heavy, their feet hurt, their stomachs growl, their temples throb. No thank you." Saturday was a kind of holy day for Haiden. A day he sanctified by staying at home, not mixing with "the rabble."

For me, though, I regarded Saturday as the human heart of the week. After five working days as a secretary in the accounting office, in routine, in uniformity, five days with the same people in a business stance of constraint and efficiency, Saturday was the day to put on walking shoes and go. Mingle with people from every quarter, see the wondrous trade brought in from the Seven Seas, hear the sounds of Babel, speak the words, taste the foods, and, all in all, rub a genie's lamp in the world's bazaars.

But Haiden insisted otherwise, and his wishes over-rode mine. "What could be more pleasant than leisurely breakfasts," he would say. "A second cup of coffee in the living room where we turn on fine music and sit reading by the glow of a soft lamp in peace and dignity —reflecting a nobility of manner, a civilized disposition. While out there," he twirled his hand in the air, "is chaos." I understood Haiden's point of view.

But today he said, "And I don't know when I'll be back."

He closed the door behind himself. The automatic garage door rose up and the car motor started. I heard voices coming from his car radio. The garage door dropped down—*thud*. After that I heard only the sound of the rain.

Why did I always feel everything was my fault? The man holds an advanced college degree and doesn't even seek work. Is it my fault he doesn't work? I'm being totally irrational to take the blame.

How long was I sitting? The rain stopped. The sun shone like a blinding sheet of metal. Knock! Knock! Knock-Knock Knock! The

door. Someone out there was full of gayety. Slowly I approached the door and peered through the peek window in the door, a regular feature of those old houses, this one covered with metal grillwork and a tiny parchment shade. “Yoo hoo. Mrs. Stoakes!” Gladys Desiree squinted to see in, revealing half a face. She looked through one eye and then the other but was unable to see inside because the glare of daylight was on her side. She rang the bell again. I stood on the other side of the door, not moving. Finally, she turned around and left.

I sat down again and addressed Haiden’s empty chair. “Haiden, do you think me selfish in wanting to retire from my employment and finance my college education?”

“Selfish? Are you serious?” Haiden laughed. “May I refresh your memory, Rhea. In the beginning of our marriage, college for both of us was my plan. But,” then he lowered his head, “we can’t foresee certain variables. It just didn’t work out that way.”

“And why not, Haiden. Please tell me, why not?”

“I was the one who encouraged you in your decision to take literature classes at night school. I encouraged you in a little interest of your own. I rejoiced in your energy and concentration. I am not so small as to begrudge you some success of your own. But Rhea, I do not read novels. That is your interest. My own reading is in the Bible and subsidiary religious texts, in writings that ponder the moral condition. My readings explore great philosophical, psychological, and sociological issues. I examine the preeminent standards of our society, its ethics and morality, nothing but first principles. I dismiss the fiction market driven, pardon me, by the hot gases of the market place.” I stopped talking and listening to the empty chair.

The rain started again. I stood up and carried both coffee cups rattling in their saucers toward the kitchen. Well, he would be home

by five-thirty for our cocktail hour. I set down the two cups and saucers on the counter and looked around mournfully at the kitchen, at the crooked cupboards, the chipped paint.

I walked into the bathroom, over to the full-length mirror attached to the door, and examined my figure for which I labored ceaselessly to please Haiden. After all, he took such care to maintain his own slimness, his narrow waistline. “Mirror, mirror, on the wall—”

“We have a responsibility to our body,” Haiden often said. “After all, the body is a holy vessel.” Not only vitamin supplements stocked our cupboards, but every morning the blender whirred with health drinks. Over night homemade yogurt formed and thickened in the low pilot light of the oven. Haiden grew his own herbs and some of our vegetables. His fitness walks and his stretching exercises were relentless and took more and more of his time each day. Caring for his body nearly evolved into a fulltime activity. Equally was he concerned for his appearance. Scalp massages retained his hairline; lotions kept his skin youthful; water picks maintained his dental hygiene. He expressed care of the self as a civic duty. “We have a responsibility to look our best for others.”

Was that lightning? The rain suddenly hurled itself in long gashes against the French windows. Where could he have gone? Who goes out for a Saturday morning drive in weather like this? I stomped toward the living room window, but tripped over myself and lunged at the sheers to break my fall. The sheers slipped through my fingers and flew in my face like scratching, stinging bees. For God’s sake, where did he go? I yanked the sheers so hard they tore away from half their hooks and I wrapped them around my arms, tightened my muscles, and ripped the rest away with all my might—How long is awhile, Haiden? An hour? A full morning? All day? The entire

structure collapsed to the floor—curtains, rod, and all, and lay there in a heap. I stared at it, feeling clumsy, ugly, unwanted, unloved.

The house resonated with silence. I looked out the window at the rain pouring down and noticed across the street a lamplight in Celia Vortek's window. A table lamp sent out a greeting to me; and I was alone and needed human contact. Come visit, it said, Celia said, for it was probably her hand that turned on that lamp. Come visit, and we two ladies will sit quietly and talk. Suddenly the rain lashed my window with such a fierceness that I was at sea staring in desperation at her lighthouse beacon. Now really, Rhea! An old woman from another generation; no, two generations. What have we in common?

Instead, I climbed into my car and went shopping in town in the downpour to furnish our three rentals.

20

Haiden showed no interest in being a landlord. I went ahead and advertised rooms for rent, and a lovely young girl by the name of Katie Shiner knocked on the door. She was one of the beautiful people of the world, endowed in every way it seemed except money. Her legs were long, her hair silky chestnut brown, her calm horizontal eyes green and soft. Ordinarily, I would have hesitated renting to her because she was so beautiful, but since Haiden showed no interest in women, not even in me, I went ahead. This young woman told me she was starting her senior year at the college, working on a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and planned to continue on for her Master's degree. That meant she would stay for a while, two or three years. She became our first tenant.

Soon after, another girl and two young men rented, all students at the college. The rear of the house became a dormitory. The tenants brought hot plates into their rooms, and the nice aromas amused me but called for cheap remarks from Haiden as he tried to identify the foods. “What? Noodles and cheese? Peasant food!” Nevertheless, with the presence of these young people, their comings and goings, their high spirits and humor, sitting on the front porch and socializing, Haiden began to perk up. I found him sitting on the front porch and talking endlessly with them. He wore ascots and smoked a pipe and looked professorial. He displayed his interest in the business section of the daily newspaper, and prominently exhibited himself on the front porch reading it, slapping it from time to time, saying “Aha!” He turned advisor and mentor to these students, especially to Katie Shiner who was studying Business Administration. After all, Haiden already held a Master’s degree in Business Administration. He was knowledgeable. And pontificating was very much to his liking. I believe he actually thought he was a professor. He began holding consulting hours. And I was amused when he bought a daily calendar to write down the appointment times for his consultations. Because the students cooked in their rooms, they sometimes invited Haiden in for tea, and he was known to bring small coffee cakes.

Katie Shiner was the most advanced. While the others were freshmen and juniors at the college, she was the only senior. Eventually Haiden gave her his card to the Graduate Library and she began to write research reports using the library’s more comprehensive resources. Her professors paid attention to the caliber of her work. There was no question that Katie was bright, even brilliant. And Haiden bestowed upon himself a great deal of credit for

that. Meanwhile as the rents were steady and we were comfortable, showing a profit, I began to talk to Haiden about my college education. But after just a remark or two, I saw cold disinterest in his eyes. Haiden dismissed my desires in preference to his own preoccupations with his students. “Can we talk about this later? I have an appointment with one of my students.” When we had courted and when we married, Haiden spoke of the sanctity of marriage which I believed in; and I, as a wife, had always tried to please him, to support him and be interested in his activities, always wanting to feel close to him in everything he did. I had expected him to do the same for me. Well, I finally concluded it just wasn’t in his nature, and I went ahead quietly and registered for college: two literatures classes and a writing workshop.

21

I pulled into Trapperman’s parking lot next to Annabelle’s van. Her van was easily recognizable because it perpetually suffered from a few dents, the old ones beaten out just in time to make way for the new ones. The interior of Annabelle’s van looked like her life—randomly packed with stuff on its way in or out. I saw a sack of mulch, several trays of pansies, a gumball machine, and a circa 1910 curio cabinet she must have picked up at the Salvation Army. Hers was a life in perpetual dishevelment, rushing zigzag from one project to another. At the moment, she was looking at herself in the rearview mirror, fighting a stubborn lock of hair. She reached into her glove compartment, yanked out a pair of scissors and cut off the lock. We jumped out of our vehicles simultaneously, dragged our umbrellas,

and collided into a hug. I whispered, “I really do need your company today;” and she said, “Uh-oh! Something’s wrong!” and we walked inside the restaurant.

She looked around. “You say your neighbor is part owner of Trapperman’s? Do we get a discount?”

“I don’t go in for discounts.”

“You’re like Haiden.”

We walked up to the hostess— Annabelle all breathless with her focus on adventure and discovery, always looking for something new to pull into her life, and I, sedate, proper and predictable; we made an odd couple. She was wearing a beaded skirt to the floor and sandals—the rainy weather of no consequence; I, in raincoat, goulashes, and a business suit—most of my clothes were for the office. I felt old and staid standing next to her; I felt as if I were Annie’s mother. The crowd covered a cross section of ages and types with a predominance of college age people; they were responsible for the noise level, the joking, the laughter, the vitality. It seemed like a practical joke was going to be pulled off any minute somewhere in the restaurant. The restaurant’s pungent aromas smacked us in the face: corned beef, barbecue sauce, French fries, pickles. “Whew!” said Annabelle, adding volume to her voice as we waited to be seated. “Terrific! Fred would love this place.”

“Coming through,” called out one waitress after another. “Hot stuff! Hot stuff!”

The fierce noise level thickened the air like the roar of a crowd inside a political convention, forcing some people to throw up their hands in resignation while others shouted across tabletops. Annabelle’s head swiveled. “What a crowd! The food must be sensational here. Get a load of the enormous jars stuffed with pickles

on each table. And prongs sticking straight up out of them! Wonderful! We help ourselves. I love this kind of a place, Rhea. But this isn't your kind of restaurant."

"More accurately, this isn't Haiden's kind of restaurant."

"Oh, your Haiden," and she rolled her eyes.

"Trapperman's is too much of the people, Haiden would say; it is too dense with noisy, sweaty humanity."

She nodded good-naturedly. "Haiden is a snob."

"Hello, ladies," said an overweight hostess. "I'll show you to your table."

"A quiet table, of course," Annabelle begged, laughing at the absurdity of such a request.

We followed the hostess.

Annabelle poked me, whispering, "Judging by her girth, she must be an aficionada of the food here."

I said, "Right now, I envy all women who loosen their corset strings with a 'To hell with the men' attitude and enjoy their food."

"She's married. Wearing a ring."

"Do you think her husband wants her to shape up?"

"Oh, it sounds like you quarreled with Haiden."

"Haiden does not quarrel. He walks away," I said.

"Haiden wants what Haiden wants," she nodded.

"That's for sure. He has definite ideas about things and is not flexible. I either go along with his thinking or am left out. He proceeds without me."

"Not my Fred. We're a team. And so is that waitress with her husband. Her husband likes her the way she is, just as Fred likes me the way I am. She and I have husbands who don't try to restrict us or block our desires."

Annabelle had been with me when I registered for the two literature classes and the writing workshop. At that time, she said, “Does Haiden know what you’re doing?”

“Why? Are you going to tattle on me?”

Her eyes stretched wide. “Good for you, Rhea!”

Our hostess led us to the last booth in the corner. “How’s this?” She switched on a tiny red-shaded wall lamp. “Your waiter’s name is Sol; he’ll be with you in just a moment, Ladies,” and she daintily swiveled her bulk away.

“She’s not so fat,” I said.

“Haiden would not approve of her,” said Annabelle as we slid into place, setting our purses down beside us, mine small and compact, and Annabelle’s an entire emergency kit. She offered, “Yes, my Fred would love a place like this; he could come in his undershirt —almost.”

She reached for the laminated plastic menus tucked behind the half-gallon pickle jar. “Here, have a menu. I’m ravenously hungry. In fact, I plan to stuff myself like a pig.”

My eyes roamed over the room. Coming toward us— I grabbed Annabelle’s arm hard— “Mr. Valentine!”

“Rhea, how nice to see you. How is everything?” he smiled when he reached us.

“Wonderful,” I said as Annabelle unpeeled her arm from my hand. She studied my face.

“Did you ever sign up for college?” he asked.

“Yes. This is Annabelle, my neighbor from my previous neighborhood before we bought the present house— to have rentals.”

“Then you took my advice, after all,” he said.

“Every bit of it. I registered for college. Annabelle was with me.”

He shook hands with Annabelle. “You’re a good friend, Annabelle.” He turned to me, “Give me your telephone number, Rhea. I’d like to invite you out sometime for lunch. We can talk about old times and your future.”

As I wrote it down, I asked him, “Are you still at the Accounting firm?”

“Oh yes.”

“And are you still playing the violin?” I tried to hold my smile under control.

“Yes. And still enjoying spaghetti, but not so much as when we. . . . Order the spaghetti,” he laughed. He kissed me on the cheek and left the restaurant.

Annabelle said, “Now that’s a handsome man.” She grabbed the prongs and lifted out a pickle. “If Fred were to meet him, he would worry about my being faithful.”

“You’re being silly,” I said.

Annabelle looked at me with one sharp eye. She fingered the menu but never opened it; she always knew what she wanted to eat well before she sat down in a restaurant—in fact, even before she left her house. It was one of the few things in her life that did not run with the whim of the moment. She waved her harpooned pickle at me and said, “So, how’s the new habitat coming along?”

I ignored her question. “Something’s bothering me.”

“I should say so. And there he goes, out the door.”

“Be serious, Annabelle.”

“Come to think of it, Rhea, you look awful. What’s going on?”

“Haiden consults with the students behind closed doors.”

“So?”

“That doesn’t disturb you?”

“No. But it does you.”

“Why does he close the door and tell me not to disturb them?”

“Well, he makes his counseling seem that much more important, I guess. You’re making something out of nothing.”

“He also drives one of the students regularly to the Graduate Library, and they’re away for hours.”

Annie leaned back against the booth at Trapperman’s and spread her arms like wings. “Restaurant booths are wonderful for confidential talks. Even better for an occasional rendezvous; I bet there has been an occasional rendezvous in this very booth.”

“Why not in all the booths, Annie!” I scoffed.

“This booth has a certain intimate light.”

“Or darkness.”

“That’s it. A darkness. A romantic darkness. Rhea, haven’t you ever had a secret desire?” she looked at me coyly.

“For what?”

She whispered it. “To have a love affair?”

I stared at her. "Annie, I believe in the sanctity of marriage."

"Well, so do I, Rhea; so do I. I’m not talking about divorce. Simply this secret desire to be involved in a little affair for a while. He’d wear silk pajamas instead of that old nightshirt Fred won’t let me throw out. He’d bring flowers and wine and music into the bedroom —Fred brings in egg sandwiches and watches television. Don’t get me wrong; Fred’s sex is good; why, he devours me. But romance is altogether different. Women need romance.”

I looked at her with her hair at all different lengths, her non-descript little face—Her sex was good? This pear-shaped gal who did

nothing to make herself attractive—I wondered if she realized how lucky she was to have Fred. Her husband had no illusions about who he was or who Annabelle was, nor did he desire to change either one of them in any way. He accepted their mortality; they were only human beings, not immortals. They would enjoy life as best they could, and that included sex. Haiden's celibacy was such that it had protracted, I believed, into a belief that it would even lengthen his life span.

"For just one night of my life I'd like to be with an absolutely gorgeous man," said Annabelle. "I'd like to know what it's like."

"What about Fred? Do you think he has a similar wish to be with an absolutely gorgeous woman?"

"I wouldn't hurt Fred for anything. Nor would he, me." She laughed. "That's why the rendezvous would only be for one night," she said.

"I don't permit myself to think along those lines," I said. Where is our waiter?"

"Fred and I— all we ever talk about is the new shipment of tropical fish for the store or rabbits or iguanas. We eat our meals together watching TV, and when we socialize with our friends we talk about the store. There isn't any romance. I want a man to look at me across a candlelit table and find me fascinating. Do you know that some days Fred and I don't say more than ten words to each other: 'Is dinner ready?" "I'm tired, hon." "Going to bed early, hon.'" She sighed, "Yes, I bet there have been lots of trysts in these booths. How do you like that word?"

"I think I hate the house."

"Why?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

“You need some neighbors for company,” said Annabelle.

“I’m surrounded by old ladies. I have nothing in common with them.”

“You’re not much interested in old people. That’s a fact.”

“How do you know?”

“You write them all alike. In class, the instructor said, “Mrs. Stoakes, your old people have interchangeable parts. They all have wrinkles, white hair, and rickety legs; they are without character or histories. They’re one-dimensional generic types posing as old people. Mrs. Stoakes, you must individualize them.’”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I said to Annie with a voice full of tediousness and indifference.

“Honestly, Rhea, even I, your most devoted reader, skip right over your narrations of old people.”

“I was never really around old people very much.”

“Your loss.”

“I have nothing in common with old people.”

“Doooon’t sell them short. They’ve got the stuff a writer wants. Just get them started with their photographs which will be all over the place and I tell you, Rhea, sitting in the heart of every old person is a treasure trunk full of stories. It’s your business to get into that trunk.”

“Where the hell is our waiter?”

“What? Swearing? You?”

“My ridiculous neighbor who lives next door harbors ill will against the old lady who lives across the street. She calls her a criminal and says she belongs in prison. She says the criminal across the street stole the great love of her life. I’m going to have an enormous plate of spaghetti and meatballs.”

“Two old women in a feud?”

“I don’t know if it’s a feud. I don’t know what it is. And I don’t care.”

“What about your red-hot ladies’ man, the one who’s fifty-five going on eighteen? The one with the peroxided hair? The one we all wanted to date when we were in high school and who’s been married three times?”

“Still in Hawaii.”

“Is he really that attractive?”

“Oh, yes. He’s the all-American beach boy, still. I think he’s got dimples to boot. Probably had them punched in surgically.”

“So, there are two old ladies and a red-hot womanizer. Listen to mother here. If Haiden goes off the deep end, you may want to have that delicious peroxided boy on the side.”

“What kind of advice is this from someone as faithful as a dog to her own husband?”

“We’re talking about you. You’re suspicious about Haiden.”

“But I’ve never said a word about an affair for myself.”

“Oh yes you have.”

“When Fred isn’t with you, do you automatically obsess that he’s having an affair?” I asked her.

“Not my Fred.”

“How do you know Fred doesn’t have some playmate on the side?”

“Are you out of your mind, Rhea?”

“Fred has a clerk who can take care of the customers while he’s off somewhere having an affair,” I said defending my hypothesis.

“She cocked her head, “Where’s Haiden right now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Good afternoon, ladies. I’m Sol, your waiter. Are you ready to order?”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” said Annabelle.

“I don’t know.” I repeated myself.

“Hah!”

“Your order, ladies?”

I looked up at our waiter who was wrapped inside a tube of white apron starting just under the top of his arms like a sarong and stopping at his knees. Why was a short stub of yellow pencil not behind his ear? “Sol, a huge plate of spaghetti and meatballs, your largest. And smother it with Parmesan Cheese.”

Annabelle never answered him. She could not take her eyes off of me.

“Okay. *Two* plates of spaghetti and meatballs. Dessert, ladies?”

“Rhea, call me as soon as Haiden returns.”

“And lemon cream pie,” I said.

l looked expectantly at Annabelle who was still staring at me while Sol said to himself, “Two pieces of lemon cream pie,” and walked off.

Annabelle opened her purse, hauled out her cellular telephone, and punched in the numbers. “Hello, Fred. What are you doing right now? Mm hmm. hmm. You’re going to clean the aquariums? Have a good time.” She hung up and leaned forward. “If Haiden is having an affair, then you can, too. But believe me, Haiden is not having an affair. It’s all about ego for him. That young student is probably fanning his ego.”

“Well, it’s true that he may not be interested in sex,” I admitted. ”There are such men.”

“I don’t believe that for one moment. But I do believe your Haiden is wrapped up in himself. There’s something wrong with him.”

I wanted to think about that statement because I concurred

That evening around five o’clock, Haiden arrived home with Katie Shiner and drove into the garage. Katie sauntered back to her room, and Haiden entered the kitchen, slipped the apron around his neck, and proceeded to prepare dinner.

22

Katie Shiner proved to be an enormously gifted student. When her senior year ended, the English Department chairperson asked her to become an instructor while studying for her Master’s Degree. She decided to move out from our house and closer to the campus to eliminate her daily commute. Besides, when she entered graduate school and held her own Graduate Library Card, she no longer needed to rely on Haiden. Even so, Haiden talked with her often on the telephone, and on occasion visited her class on campus. He somehow could not let go, since he felt she was his prodigy.

He went on counseling the other students, wearing his ascot, smoking his pipe, and shutting the door during consultations. Was it the click of the door knob? The dark, even sinister color of the door itself? The shuffling feet and muffled tones from the interior? The laughter? Maybe even the intervals of silence. Maybe the combination of all those things. I began to feel uneasy about something without being able to name it. Until one day. I waited for him outside one of those doors; I actually stood there like a guard and waited, and when

the door finally opened, I shot out, “Haiden, I don’t think you should close the door when you are counseling our tenants about their studies, especially the girls.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t think it looks right.”

“Are you questioning my morality? This is incredible. I don’t believe this.” He stomped back to his study, and I followed him saying, “It doesn’t look good.”

“I will quote to you from the Bible,” he said, sitting down hard in his chair, drumming impatiently on the desktop, and giving me an order. “Would you please fetch my Bible over on that table.” Obliging him was easier than having a confrontation. It was a very heavy Bible and during its transit it slipped out of its leather case onto the floor. Haiden jumped up and lunged for the book as I was lifting it off the floor. He grabbed it out of my hands and hastily examined every inch of it to discover that one corner of the cover was bent. His fingers frantically worked over the damaged corner, trying to return it to its original shape. No use. He rose up slowly, glaring at me. At the same time, a rush of crimson dye traveled upward from the base of his neck, spread over his face, and stopped sharp at the hairline where the color met a tight band of white scalp. His eyes bulged, and his head nodded back and forth like a cudgel, and I thought he was about to choke, when in a voice unrecognizable—high, shrill, shrieking —"YOU JUST DID A VERY STUPID THING BECAUSE YOU ARE STUPID. YOU ARE STUPID, STUPID, STUPID, STUPID, STUPID.”

Stunned. Dazed. I felt myself reeling.

“The book was heavy,” I mumbled, barely looking at him, maybe looking at him fleetingly. Haiden picked up the leather case. His mouth oscillated back and forth as if to control spittle as he examined

the book once more; then he slid it into its case, cradling it in his arms like a mother her child, rocking back and forth. I walked out of the room, my heels soundless for the din in my ears, and fled the house to the front porch.

Haiden was gone all that day. At four-thirty in the afternoon, he sauntered through the door. I lurched out, ready to demand an apology. No! I stopped myself. I would wait. But looking at his face, I realized he had no intention of explaining or apologizing. He walked toward our little bar area, pulled down two martini glasses, then the gin and vermouth, set everything on the counter, click, click, click, added the orange bitters and olives, and proceeded to mix our cocktails. He had chosen not to offer an explanation or apologize.

Dinner was eaten in total silence. Breakfast the next morning was always a quiet event because of the voluminous Sunday newspaper. Haiden read the front page as I stared at him. He was fully dressed, even to his ascot, but my impeccable husband had not lifted his razor this morning.

After breakfast, he said, “The church brotherhood is setting up for a fundraiser,” and he left.

23

Late that same Sunday afternoon, Haiden’s voice at the other end of the telephone said, “The fellas are going out for bowling and beer, and I thought, What the hell? And I decided to join them.” He hung up. I blinked at the receiver. A wrong number? A hoax? But there was no mistaking Haiden’s voice—I ate dinner alone. I washed the dishes. I straightened the towel. Whatever I did that evening, his

words replayed in my head: "The fellas are going out for bowling and beer, bowling and beer, bowling and beer." It was like listening to some recording, stuck to repeat and repeat. At my desk while I read my textbook, I tried to write, but I heard it; watching the news on television I heard it; reading in bed; turning out the light and shutting my eyes. The words shifted to "What the hell, what the hell, what the hell."

The next morning, I stared at the newspaper as Haiden held it in front of his face. "Haiden, did you enjoy yourself with the fellas last night?" His shirt was hanging out, over his belt. A new style?

"Yes!" he snapped the newspaper open wider.

Wasn't he wearing yesterday's clothes?

From behind the newspaper, "The fellas talked about getting together every Sunday night. I agreed to it."

What was happening here? Primal male bonding? This was not the man I married.

Through the week, we spoke little. I was concerned. When Saturday rolled around, Haiden left the house early in the morning. He was leaving the house on his precious Saturday, his sanctuary day. I listened to the garage door: *THUD*. Like a guillotine. The telephone rang. It rang and rang and rang. It stopped. Then started again.

I grabbed the receiver.

"Rhea, what's going on over there?"

"Nothing. You know better than to phone me during my writing hours."

"I was worried. I haven't heard from you."

"Goodbye, Annie."

"Rhea?"

I hung up.

Fresh air, I needed fresh air. I stood up shakily. I groped my way out to the front porch, to the cool porch and the dazzling sun beyond. Into my nostrils rushed the sweet scents of freshly cut lawn, of sun melting the dew, of flowers.

"Good morning, Mrs. Stoakes."

Who? Oh, the mailman.

"As I was about to say the other day, Mrs. Stoakes, we all grew old together on this street until finally the neighborhood was made up of only old people living in old houses. *Thud.* Celia Vortek was born in that house across the street from you. That's a long time to live in one house."

He hiked up his mailbag. "But this neighborhood is changing because more young folk like you are moving in. There are little kids on the sidewalk now. Some of the old houses are being modernized. Folks are widening the garages and driveways to hold two cars; they're bringing in carpenters, painters, roofers. But the porches are not changing one bit, no, not one little bit. If you ask me, people understand that this here street is really unique because it goes back in time. The big, wide porches — they don't build porches like these anymore. Some day these houses will be worth a lot of money."

He talked and I was grateful. But then as abruptly as he started he stopped. He handed me a stack of envelopes and magazines, and continued on his angled way. *Thud.* I shuffled the mail on my lap. Bills from the carpet cleaner, the gardener, the telephone company, all for me since I handled the finances. The New York Times Book Review was addressed to me. For Haiden Stoakes, a newsletter from the church brotherhood. Suddenly, I heard little boys screaming in delight riding their tricycles up and down the sidewalk. They wore shorts and their soft knees pumped up and down as they aimed their water

pistols at little girls wearing their mothers' high-heeled shoes and pushing doll buggies.

At dinnertime Haiden arrived home without an explanation. He said he wasn't very hungry. "Are you ill?" I asked. "No." We spent the evening reading in our respective chairs. Every so often I looked up to find him staring at his Bible. What had happened to his erect posture? Maybe he was ill and didn't know it. For God's sake, why had I not considered that possibility months ago?

"Haiden, perhaps you need a physical examination." He waved away any such discussion. I knew it was useless. He held an aversion for doctors, called them quacks who robbed you of your money. "Doctors do not appreciate the body as a holy vessel. They have no regard for the benefits of natural foods devoid of sugars, salts, and artificial preservatives; they only respect drugs. Hence they treat bodies as garbage bins." So that was that!

I upset him with my suggestion. So I prepared a cup of hot herbal tea for us as I usually did because he liked that, but tonight he headed straight toward the bedroom instead and began his nightly routine—setting out his mouthwash, his floss, his water pick, his electric toothbrush. I heard the water running. When I entered the bedroom, Haiden had rolled over on his side and was already asleep. I noticed that his night table drawer was half open and his water glass was empty. He had sleeping pills.

I sorely needed a sleeping pill myself this night. I finally took one of Haiden's. It caused me to dream.

I dreamed that I was in a strange city somewhere in Europe. Haiden had decided to stay in bed that day, and I went for a walk in the middle of that city. I became lost. Tall buildings suddenly surrounded me. I couldn't get my bearings and felt desperate. I ran

into a store looking for a telephone to talk with Haiden. Unable to find a telephone, I ran to another store, and still another, not finding a telephone anywhere, becoming bewildered, desperate, I was running now in circles. All hotels had telephones. I ran to a hotel and inside finally found a telephone, but I discovered that I had forgotten how to work it.

When I awoke early next morning, Haiden's side of the bed was empty. In no way would I permit myself to go searching for him through the house. I dressed slowly and listened for sounds of life. Nothing. I proceeded into the kitchen to prepare my breakfast. I opened the refrigerator door, set out fruit and yogurt on the counter, and that's when I noticed dishes in the sink. What was this? A cereal bowl with traces of what appeared to be chocolate syrup? Incredulously, I walked over to the pantry, opened it and saw on the second shelf a partially opened box of Sugar-Coated Wheat Puffs. Next to it a bag of chocolate chip cookies. Was this the right kitchen? Was I in someone else's house?

Hearing the hose running, I stepped out to the porch and saw Haiden on the driveway washing his car. Suddenly he reached over the hood, moved the chamois back and forth, and his shirt that now regularly hung loose over his waistline hiked up. My eyes bulged. A roll of fat was developing at the top of his belt.

"God damn it," he shouted. The hose had slipped out of Haiden's hand and turned on him, drenching him. "God damn it, God damn it, God damn it." This was not my golden-tongued orator. He pulled off his soaking shirt and now I saw that he was also growing breasts of flab.

Stunned, I returned to the kitchen to eat my breakfast. I sat down and tried to read the newspaper, but my eyes floated all over

the print. Then I heard it: *thud*. The garage door. Haiden drove off. The numbing feeling that overcame me was actually protecting me. I stood up and marched out of the kitchen and into the study, Haiden's study really. I looked at his grand desk that consumed most of the room, and at his accessories that were so promising. I always felt like an intruder with my second-hand schoolteacher's desk and my computer. Haiden wanted nothing to do with the computer world. I wanted nothing to do with his study. I scooped up my things, marched out to the porch and set up my domain.

24

Our marriage was altogether shot, but neither one of us could walk away. Haiden had dishonored the sanctity of our marriage. He had discarded all of his principles. He was not the right man for me, not the man who first drew me to him. Both of us were now stuck in an unsatisfactory arrangement. While the house offered Haiden safety from further failure, the house enabled me to continue college and do my writing. I was not willing to leave it and work full time and sacrifice my writing future. Besides, why should I suffer? Haiden was the one who created our problems.

I had no idea how long I sat like that on the porch until, "Afternoon, Mrs. Stoakes," said the mailman approaching.

"What! Noon already?" I blinked

He adjusted his visor against the sun and said, "I told the neighbors that we now have a writer living on the block. I added you to the collection. The brown house is an Asian acupuncturist; the yellow house works for city hall; the green house is a husband and wife school teacher team; the white house runs a beauty shop; the—" At that moment, across the street, an old black Ford slowly turned

into the single-car driveway—into Celia Vortek's driveway. The wheels carefully moved along two narrow strips of concrete accommodating the tires, between the grass strips of orange and yellow nasturtiums. The car slowly rolled to a stop midway. The driver's door swung outward, and the mailman said, "There she is: Miss Celia Vortek."

A round little woman wearing a flowered smock and a man's haircut stepped out and walked toward the door of the old-fashioned single-car garage. She pulled open the two halves of the garage door, one to the left, the other to the right, like opening the curtains to the prologue of a play. Then she came around to the rear of the car. I could see that her stockings were rolled down to her ankles like socks, meeting the rim of her soft slippers. She pulled up the lid of the trunk and lifted out two grocery bags. Then she marched toward the dark interior of the garage, disappeared, and a few minutes later emerged for more bags of groceries. She never looked up. Like a windup toy intent on its circular business, she again retreated.

"That is the femme fatale who stole Gladys' greatest love?" I declared.

"There she is; that's Celia. Well, I'll leave you. It's lunchtime. You'll be going in to prepare something," he said, handing me my mail and moving on to the next house.

I continued to watch Celia as she slammed down the trunk of her car and carried the last bag into her dark garage. A moment later, she came out and pulled the two sides of her garage door to the center, and she walked inside.

I returned to my computer screen and discovered that I had been writing steadily on the computer for the last three hours. I had flung the problem of Haiden out of my body and onto the screen: his

character, the tension he was creating, the entire dilemma. I pounded the computer keys knowing that our dilemma was the problem.

And so along with my computer, I accommodated myself as best I could under the circumstances. I had dragged my second-hand schoolteacher's desk out on the porch. I added a telephone, a long rectangular table, a lamp, a footstool, a dictionary, a synonym finder, a battered two-volume set of encyclopedias, a small clock, and a radio. The hammock from the previous owners was already in place to serve me during afternoon naps. And so I took up my new life in my new habitat. Out on the porch.

PART III

25

On Perdue Street, the porches were as large as some interior rooms, deep and dark, surrounded with half walls and trSmithes. They exhaled cool perfumes from over-grown vines of star jasmine, wisteria, and passion flowers, all soundlessly twisting around each other and rambling over the clapboard, the shingles, and the river rock, up onto the roofs, circumnavigating the chimneys and mingling irretrievably with the thick trunked and heavy limbed trees in a symbiotic marriage of drenching leafiness. And now along with the lifestyles reflected on all the other porches along the street, I added my own. I had settled myself out on the porch and the mailman thought Haiden and I were in the midst of a lovers' quarrel.

During the daytime, I now wore shorts (no longer those buttoned-up suits for the office), and I walked barefoot on the porch

and felt like a younger version of myself. I sat in the lotus position in my desk chair with crossed legs as I read my textbooks or typed into my computer. I ate my lunches sitting on the wooden ledge and tossed breadcrumbs to the birds on the lawn or watched the children passing along the sidewalk. My little radio played music all day long. And my writing day ended with a glass of wine from a stemmed glass that caught the late afternoon sun while I fantasized about the future. In it, a literary agent would sell a novel of mine to a big publishing house, and then it would become a film, and then I'd write a second novel and a third. To my surprise, I was writing a mystery. It was about Haiden. He had changed so much. He was turning into someone else. I realized that not only did I not approve of the new Haiden, I never really liked the old Haiden very much. My parents had misjudged his character and so had I. And so had he, himself. Haiden had created an image of himself for himself. He was turning into a mystery man. And what about the two old women? Gladys created an image of herself for herself. In addition to that, she was jealous of a woman whom she said created a scandal. Although I didn't know how much truth there was to it, Celia Vortek's actions were so peculiar as to warrant some literary attention.

I became the cook now that Haiden's presence at home was erratic. However, as soon as I set his plate and glass on the table, I left the kitchen for the porch, with my own plate and glass in hand. No longer would I permit myself to sit quietly and listen to him deliver his dinnertime sermons. And after dinner, I lingered out there, leaving the dinner dishes for later in favor of my immediate pleasures. I read out on the porch under the light of my lamp, with my shoes kicked off and my legs curled under me. In the darkness, I rocked on my

hammock beneath the stars, in the velvet air, breathed in the heavy fragrances, listened to the songs of the crickets, and declared as in the story of Creation, “This is good.” The porch was my haven. I slept well out there. I slept badly in the house, agitatedly, on and off, often waking hot and wet. But the porch, my little haven, cooled me and calmed me. Out there, I came alive imagining the fairies romping in the blue air, laughing and sipping sweet nectar from trumpet-shaped blossoms, and skating on the dewy lawns spread with a silvery mock snow. The porch in the enchantment of night became my opiate.

It was on such a night soon after I began sleeping in the hammock that the incident occurred. I woke up from some external agitation, a light. I sat up on my hammock, and saw it coming from the house across the street— Celia Vortek’s house. I saw her figure pass by. Her draperies and her sheers stretched wide open and so the view into her window was completely accessible to me. There, again! I looked at my clock. What was she doing up at three-thirty in the morning? I stared in with the palpable fear of seeing something I should not see. I was, in fact, at that moment, aware of being a voyeur. Yet I could not stop myself.

Slowly Celia wrapped a towel around the head of a long-stemmed mop. Then she held up the stem and, with wide sweeping motions from side to side, she began to dust the walls. Her movements were graceful and undulating. I sat there on my porch, almost hypnotized by her motion. Time passed, and I grew sleepy and lay down on the hammock. I fell asleep. Awakening later, I glanced at my small clock, four-thirty, and then I glanced across the street. She was still at it, working the other walls of the room. Suddenly, her window turned dark.

26

“It’s guilt,” Gladys Desiree sneered. I sat with her at her tea table waiting for the kettle to whistle.

“Guilt?” I exclaimed.

Again she sneered. “Everyday I remind her of her evil just by walking out in my front garden so that she sees me. And at night, I sit out on my porch and she sees the light over my head like the eye of conscience.” She hissed, “That’s how I torment her. More tea?”

“Has she said anything?”

“It’s too late for apologies.”

“What do you actually say to her?”

“I haven’t spoken to her in almost forty years.”

“You’re still so angry with her after forty years? My, that must have been some lover.”

Her eyes turned watery. “He was more wonderful to me than any other man I have ever known b efore ir sunce.”

“Oh, then there have been others?”

“Of course there have been others. But none like Mr. Norton Lapper.” She looked off at some distant point while tears filled up in two small gondolas. “I’ll go check on the tea things.” She dashed away into her kitchen and I bided my time looking around her living room and dining room, both rooms being choked with clutter and noise. A mechanical bird warbled; a cuckoo clock spoke; and several sets of wind chimes tinkled and chinkled. I browsed from object to object in this Victorian gift shop—from the collection of teapots on the sideboard, to the porcelain rabbits and squirrels lurking at the base of

potted plants. There were wicker chairs and rocking chairs, footstools and garden benches, watering cans, trSmithes and flower baskets. No wonder her porch was bare! Everything was indoors. But there weren't any photographs.

"Camomile Tea, my dear," she called out loudly to me from the kitchen. "We're having Camomile Tea, just like Peter Rabbit was given when he had been naughty. Have you been naughty, Rhea Stoakes?"

"No, Gladys Desiree," I called back just as loudly. "But perhaps you have been up to something."

"Oooh, me? Me? No, no, no, not meeeeh!" She giggled. "That's rich. I would so like to be naughty. But my opportunities have been severely curtailed in recent years. Instead, I fill up my life with things—as you can see."

"Ah, but you have had your naughty days."

"I have tried. Yes, I certainly have tried." I heard the refrigerator open and close, and the faucet water turn on and off. " Have you and your husband been married long?" she called out.

"Yes," I said loudly.

"I don't see any children. Do you have children?"

"No," I shouted.

"Here I come, ready or not," she sang, clutching a tray. Her fingers, I now noticed, were covered with rings. "Beautiful scones. And we have whipped butter, raspberry preserves, and orange blossom honey. There, now."

She poured so daintily. An old-fashioned lady with a small bow in her hair; an extinct breed. I expected her to set out a saucer of cream on a doily for a cat.

“Well, at least you have a husband. A woman without a husband leads half a life,” she said with a guttural sound.

“There are a lot of single women out there who would disagree with you,” I said.

“My dear, there are more single women out there who would agree with me.”

“You sound as though you were very happily married at one time, Gladys, and you miss it.”

Her ears suddenly pulled back and her face tightened. She rolled back her upper lip to reveal large pink gums and tiny teeth like crooked stones. “I was never married. That was Celia Vortek’s doing. God damn her in hell.”

I almost dropped my cup and saucer.

She held up her ringed fingers and wiggled them. “These are all of my engagement rings, but you notice one finger is without a ring,” she hissed, “because of Celia!” and the nostrils of her considerable nose flared. She immediately regained her composure and slipped into a discussion about the kinds of teas she liked, the recipe for her scones, and the names for the endless variety of flowering plants in her yard—the bleeding hearts, the bachelor-buttons, the heartsease. . . . She talked about her loquat tree, and the fresh mint from her garden that she sometimes tucked into her lingerie drawer. “Men like the scent of fresh mint.” She talked on and on, and my eyelids grew heavy. “I notice you do not display family pictures,” I was sorry as soon as I mentioned the fact.

“Pictures? You don’t believe me. Well, I will show you pictures.” She pushed the palms of her hands out in front of her to say, Stay where you are. She hastily spun around and literally danced out of her parlor. She returned in a flash. “Here we are,” she sang

out, holding an enormous red velvet scrapbook. Her treasure trunk. She sat down close to me, and with eyes shining said, “Ready?” as if we were starting on some exhilarating journey.

“Yes, indeed.”

Her treasure trunk, without a doubt! Thanks to Annabelle’s terminology. Gladys opened the scrapbook to a picture of a handsome young man with an alluring gaze. She spoke the name, “William.” Pasted down around the picture were a poem, a pressed flower, and the word “Pumpkin.” She giggled, “His nickname for me.” At the bottom of the page, she fingered a folded paper and whispered, “a love letter. I kept my favorite one.” She sighed a young woman’s sigh, “William was my first serious beau.” Placing her hand over her heart, “He liked to sing, and took me to all the Nelson Eddy-Jeanette MacDonald movies. Afterwards, he himself would sing Nelson Eddy’s songs to me. Of course, he hadn’t actually memorized all the words; he made some up. And they were so romantic.” She turned the page. “Franklin.” He also was a handsome man with an alluring gaze. A pressed rose, a poem, another love letter. “Franklin was a very proper young man. He courted me in the most traditional manner: flowers, candy, Sunday concerts in the park. My goodness, when we walked across the street, he held my elbow. Mercy, you’d think I couldn’t do a thing by myself. Oh, how Franklin pampered me.” Then came Oswald. “Now Oswald had a wild streak. He was a bit of a daredevil, you might say. He drove his automobile too fast just to scare me. Then he would laugh and put his arm around me saying, ‘Don’t be frightened, little bunny rabbit. And kiss me on the cheek and then right here.” She pointed to the side of her neck. “It ran goose bumps up and down me every time. And he knew it.” Gladys continued, page

after page, one handsome man after another, one pressed flower after another, one poem, one love letter, one nickname.

"All of your beaus certainly were handsome," I exclaimed.

"Oh yes. Handsomeness was a strict requirement." She touched her cigarette-shaped curls.

She went on to tell me why she rejected them. In one case, the cause lay with his mother—"a matter of jealousy;" another was "a notorious gambler;" still another "lost all of his money in bad investments and was too ashamed—he committed suicide." Gladys lowered her voice, "I even was engaged for a short time to a minor Austrian aristocrat, very minor; but one day he pulled out from his pocket a monocle, propped it against his eye, and at that moment I suspected him of pro-Nazi tendencies." Gladys waved her hand over her domain of bric-a-brac and said, "From time to time through the years, former lovers have sent me gifts and cards that are tucked away here among my things." Then mournfully, "I sometimes wondered if any of those suitors was my Mr. Right. But by now they all have died off, and I am completely alone. Such is the fate of a person who has never married."

"I do not see a page for Mr. Norton Lapper."

She looked at me for a long moment. "I did not wonder about him. He WAS Mr. Right." She was silent again, and began to squirm in her seat. "Excuse me, Rhea." She jumped up and ran out of the room.

I listened to the mechanical bird warble, to the cuckoo clock, to the several sets of wind chimes clinking and chinkling.

When she returned, she held up one small photograph, or rather half of a photograph; the work of scissors was undeniable. She ran her fingers nervously along the uneven edge, but held on tightly as

she brought it close to me. Expecting another wonderfully handsome face, I stared instead at a stocky balding gentleman with thick glasses. He was smiling, I think. His upper lip shaped into two sharply pointed pyramids above chipmunk teeth. He held his lips precisely, indicating that when he spoke the twin pyramids slid upward, and then slid down again to meet their counterpart in the form of a plump kiss.

“He looks very gentlemanly,” I said.

“Oh he was, Rhea. He was such a gentleman. You know, he always wore a white shirt and a bow tie as if he were coming a-courting. I liked that. And I liked the way he stood, proudly on the balls of his feet, with his hands behind his back as if hiding something —a box of chocolates—and was going to surprise me with it at any moment. He once took me out for lunch to Trapperman’s. We sat in a private booth having a little red lamp shade and he was very affectionate. He whispered such things to me! There was a gleam in his eyes, you see, because he was a bit of a flirt, oh my. He was just a little bit naughty, the teensiest. He made me giggle ‘til I almost wet my panties.”

Flabbergasted, not knowing what to say, I managed “Your ages were close?”

She did not hear me. I waited.

“There were so many fine plans for us to think about. An ocean liner to Paris for our honeymoon. You know what they say: ‘Paris is for lovers.’ In those days, an ocean liner was the most romantic way to travel. Mr. Lapper was very interested in photography, not in scenery; he was only interested in people, even parts of people. Oh, he was so amusing. He stood up very close to me and studied my nose. My goodness, you won’t believe what he said to me. He said, ‘I

want to climb inside that magnificent nose, to become familiar with every part of it.’ Well, oh my goodness! I could feel his manly breath on my cheek; I don’t mind telling you it was thrilling. You see the man was an artist. I knew he would be taking pictures of me on our honeymoon, oh, in front of the Arch de Triumphe, the Eiffel Tower, mixing with the crowds along the boulevard of the Champs Elysees. At sunset, sipping aperitifs at one of those outdoor tables. Mr. Lapper liked to have his camera always ready.”

Suddenly her voice turned into rock gravel. “But Celia Vortek vamped him away from me.” He never looked at Celia Vortek until she became a—” She stopped abruptly and never returned to the subject.

Later as I was about to leave, she turned one eye on me. “You are so fortunate, Rhea. Take good care of that man of yours. Pamper him, adore him, and he will return that affection.”

27

The mailman’s cigar announced his approach. “Your porch is getting mighty full, Mrs. Stoakes.”

“I didn’t know you smoked cigars,” I said, looking up with a frown from my computer.

“It’s a present from Gladys Desiree. One day she hates me, the next day she loves me. Back and forth, back and forth.” He puffed away and laughed.

I fanned at the smoke coming in my direction.

He read the mail as he handed it out. “A reminder card from your dentist, and Mr. Stoakes’ wine magazine. Oops! I almost forgot the package of French roast coffee beans. Are you a coffee connoisseur?”

“My husband is.”

“I find out a lot about people’s lives from delivering their mail.”

“I’m sure you do,” I said, reaching for our mail.

“You take the two old ladies on this street. Gladys Desiree gets a light bill, a water bill, and lots of junk advertisements. Same for Celia Vortek except for her comic book that arrives the first of every month. When people get really old, like those ladies, they don’t have friends anymore or any interests. Gladys gets a catalog four times a year; she buys things to doll herself up and her house because she still believes there’s a suitor coming around the corner.” He maneuvered his cigar to the corner of his mouth and crunched up his left eye against a spiral of smoke. “A comic book and a mail-order catalog don’t say much for two lives.” He tipped his cap, let out his cigar for an airing, then maneuvered it back in, puffed on it, and went on his way, leaving a trail behind to permeate everything on my porch.

But he was right about my porch. I had added another worktable, a plug-in hot plate for my coffee pot, a bookcase for additional reference books, a better radio, and a cupboard filled with throw pillows and an afternoon lounger. While I focused on my studies, I was able to forget Haiden. I read voraciously for my literature classes and wrote obsessively for my writing workshop, particularly for my instructor, Mr. Wheeler, who was himself a successful mystery novelist.

Mr. Wheeler certainly encouraged me. However, he also criticized my protagonist as being too passive. I argued for her: “She took great initiative by retiring from her employment without consulting her husband.” Mr. Wheeler shook his head complaining, “That was not enough.” And I rejoined, “She sold their first house and

purchased the new one in her own name only." Mr. Wheeler said I was getting closer, but still that was not enough. But when I suggested that later in the plot she would fear her husband was planning to murder her (after all, this was a mystery novel and I needed to heighten the dramatic treatment), Mr. Wheeler said, "I believe Haiden has complicated feelings toward your protagonist: inferiority, envy— He does not like her very much." He winked, "Now your fiction is going somewhere."

I told Haiden that Mr. Wheeler saw potential in my talent. He promised to show my writing to his own literary agent.

"Good for you, Rhea. Let us open a bottle of champagne and drink to your future success."

Haiden immediately climbed into the car and speeded to the liquor store. He brought back a chilled bottle and two glasses. "Let us celebrate right now, Rhea. One day you will be a famous writer, and I will be the husband of a famous writer." Haiden filled the two glasses and proceeded to guzzle his glass and refill it repeatedly.

Out there on the porch, week after summer week, I worked diligently. The sun burned down through the haze and I was engulfed in my studies. From time to time I looked out and squinted and watched the children playing along the sidewalk. One day when I looked up, I suddenly saw in the cave-like darkness of the porch across the street, beyond the half wall over there, a small movement. Someone was sitting, looking at me.

I waved.

An arm waved back.

I told Annabelle about the little scene.

"Try to get a good look at this femme fatale," said Annabelle. And tell me all about it."

"I've seen her. She's short and round, wears a man's haircut, and stockings rolled down to her ankles."

"Get a closer look. Maybe that was the mother."

On my next marketing day, I drove my car up to our indoor-outdoor neighborhood market with its corrugated metal roof. Was that Celia's old black Ford in the parking lot? I looked around. There she was, making her way inside. I liked that market. Sawdust caught the hazards of fallen produce; immigrant clerks re-stocked, straightened the displays, sliced off samples for customers, answered questions about the ripeness of a melon or the sweetness of a tangerine. I found myself glancing around for the sight of her. I jerked a wagon loose from the centipedal row and proceeded methodically. Fuji apples, strawberries, red leaf lettuce, green onions, lemons—all magnificent jewels. Where was she? I moved toward the rear of the market to the potatoes; they were like uncut diamonds piled up in some cool inconspicuous corner. No Celia. I looked in beyond an open doorway to men in green aprons and black rubber boots standing at deep tin sinks washing and trimming all manner of leafy vegetables. Suddenly, there, beside me, placing a netted sack of onions in her wagon, was Celia wearing one of her housedresses, her stockings rolled down to meet her soft slippers, and her short man's haircut. Now let's have a good look at her.

I don't know what I expected when I tapped her shoulder: probably a round face with the usual crevices and spider webs of old people, adding up to nondescript features, an old woman who would look like a thousand other old women. Didn't they all look alike at

some point? She turned around. Here I saw a smooth moon with little cheekbones arching out. Her face was pretty. Her mouth was sweet like a young girl's. She peered at me hard as if trying to place me.

"Rhea Stoakes across the street." I waved as I had from my porch. Then I held out my hand.

Her eyebrows shot up. "Across the street. Yes. My new neighbor." She took my hand with great exuberance and pumped to beat the band. "I am Celia Vortek," she said and a faint smell of mothballs emanated from her. "Perhaps, Mrs. Rhea Stoakes, you will come across the street sometime to visit. We can enjoy a nice dish of cottage cheese and peaches together." She continued to pump. "Yes, please come over to visit."

I told her I would, and then we pushed off with our wagons and went our separate ways through the aisles. This was the criminal?

28

Trapperman's Restaurant apparently was always jammed on Saturday around the lunch hour. Annabelle said, "What do you mean: cottage cheese and peaches? I don't know what to make of her." We followed the hostess to the booth. She switched on the tiny wall lamp with the red shade.

Sol greeted us as long-standing customers. This time the short stub of a pencil did rest behind his ear. "The usual, ladies? Spaghetti and meatballs and lemon cream pie?" He placed two glasses of ice water on the table.

Annabelle treated him with familiarity. "Sol," she started, "what would you think of a woman who invites you to come over not for a cup of coffee but for a bowl of cottage cheese and peaches?"

We watched Sol remove his pencil and scratch his head. “Well, I would say that woman really likes cottage cheese and peaches.” He laughed. “I would also say that she is not in touch.”

Annabelle snapped her fingers, “Exactly. That’s it. She is not in touch. Sol, I’m coming to you with all my problems.”

He smiled, replaced his pencil behind his ear, and swaggered away.

Annabelle suddenly looked very serious. “How are you doing, Rhea?”

“Haiden is getting worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s falling apart,” I said.

“Did your marriage join the legions of the disillusioned?”

“He disappears every Friday evening, all day Saturdays, all day Sundays. Most recently, he has added the entire work week as well.”

“Maybe he has taken a job, something secretive for the time being.”

“His hair is getting long.”

“Is it attractive?”

“It’s greasy.”

“What! Impeccable Haiden?”

“And he’s eating all the time, munching on anything he can get his hands on: Cookies, chocolate syrup. He gained weight. He’s got a tire.”

“Haiden?”

The house is not orderly or clean. The drawers are a mess.”

“Now I am hearing something. Something is the matter.”

“The man won’t stay in the house. He’s either running away from something or toward something,” I said.

Annabelle placed her elbows firmly on the Formica tabletop and said in the official capacity of a close friend, “Rhea, just because you cannot account for him does not immediately incriminate Haiden into having an affair.”

“The irony is that Haiden has never condoned such behavior in other men. He has gone on about it at great length. He has preached dinnertime sermons on the subject.”

“Your Haiden is unbendingly righteous.”

“The evidence is all around to the contrary.”

“He’s not having an affair, Rhea.” She pounded her fist on the table.

“Just as you say.” I sat back.

“He probably spends all of his time out with the fellas,” she said.

I began wiping water spots feverishly with the paper napkin.

Annabelle stared at me.

“He not only doesn’t talk, he never looks at me. Why doesn’t he look at me, Annie? And why is he eating crazily?”

“It may be stress,” she said.

“What stress? The man leads a stress-free life, not being employed. His life is exactly the way he wants it.”

Annabelle said, “I concede that it isn’t what most men would choose; but each to his own. Here comes Sol. The restaurant is probably out of lemon cream pies.”

“Sorry, ladies; we’re out of lemon cream pies. Another choice?”

Annabelle asked him, “Sol, why does a man who has always enjoyed talking with his wife suddenly stop talking with his wife?”

“He’s probably spending too much money at the track and can’t open his mouth or he’ll let out his shame.”

“Forget the pie,” we both said together.

He nodded and left.

“My guess is that something is happening at the church,” said Annabelle. “Some kind of politics.”

“He doesn’t hold office, but there’s nothing new there.”

“You know why? Because some people think he’s a blowhard. They can’t take his oratory. Personally, I like it terribly. It makes him grand,” she said.

I spotted Katie Shiner leaving her table and coming toward us. I warned Annabelle. “She used to be a tenant. And she absolutely idolized Haiden.”

“Mrs. Stoakes! What a surprise. How good to see you. Did Haiden tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“My Master’s Thesis is going to be published by a major publishing house. And I’ve received letters from several Ivy League universities to teach— Oops! I can’t talk. You know what Saturdays are like: errands, errands, errands.” She nodded to Annabelle as though they had been introduced. Then she was gone.

Annabelle fell back. “Did you see that row of carnivorous teeth? I trust her as far as I can throw her.”

Sol arrived with our spaghetti and meatballs.

She said, “Sol, why didn’t you consider another woman?”

“I did. Guess who’s with him at the track making him bet all that money?”

“My husband believes in the sanctity of marriage.”

“Everybody does,” said Sol.

I suddenly felt sorry for Haiden. What kind of trouble was he having? I returned home with the intentions of being the concerned wife. Haiden was already home, carrying a martini over to the marble coffee table in the living room. “I’ll join you, Haiden.” He reached for a second glass, then the gin and vermouth, and mixed a drink for me. On the marble coffee table between our two reading chairs lay a large platter loaded up with several dozen impaled jumbo shrimp and next to it a dish of red sauce. He ripped open a bag of nachos. We sat down. Haiden plunked himself into his chair. He began stuffing his face with the nachos.

“I ran into Katie Shiner today,” I said, watching a sudden rapidity to his self-feeding.

“She looked marvelous,” I said suspiciously.

A splash of red sauce dropped onto his tie. He blotted it with a small paper napkin.

“Such a beautiful young girl. She must have lots of boyfriends,” I added.

He glanced at me as he leaned forward and impaled one shrimp with a toothpick, dipped it into the sauce, popped it in his mouth, and followed with a second, third, and fourth shrimp. He shifted to one hip and hiked one leg over the other and immediately began tapping his foot up and down nervously. He stared at his martini, swiveling it up near the rim.

“Haiden, she told me her Master’s Thesis is going to be published by a major publishing house. Did you know that?”

Haiden’s foot stopped. He brought his martini glass to his lips. “Yes.” He took a large swig. His fingernails, long now, tapped against the glass. I began to tell him about the Ivy League offering her when he snapped, “I don’t want to hear about it.” He tilted his head back,

took another swig, then guzzled his drink to finish it off. He stared straight ahead for a few moments, stood up and carried his empty glass into the kitchen, and the next sound I heard was the lifting of the garage door, the sound of the car motor, and finally— *thud*. It was dinnertime.

29

"Rhea, dear, I'd like you to come for tea Friday afternoon," said Gladys Desiree. "About two o'clock. A little welcome home party for Mr. Johnnie Banghart. God bless him, that man brings joy into my life." Her voice shot up two octaves with exhilaration.

"Who?"

"Your neighbor, dear, in the house next door to you on the other side. He just returned from his vacation in the Hawaiian Islands. Oh, let me tell you, confidentially, if I were just five years younger, I wouldn't let him get away. I'd grab him for a lover. My dear, you will adore him; he is the most charming man."

At two o'clock on Friday afternoon, I walked up the steps to Gladys' porch. I called through the open door, "Hello!"

She called back, "Ooh, Rhea; come in," sounding flightier than usual, almost as if she were dancing through the rooms.

Another voice came from behind me. "Hello, neighbor," said Don Juan. "I come bearing pineapples, as promised." He held one in each arm.

"Ooh, Johnnie! Come in, come in," sang out Gladys, appearing suddenly.

He and I both walked in together. He walked toward her, this tall muscular ever-youthful looking man with his peroxided blond locks, Hawaiian tan, and Hawaiian shirt open almost to the waist—oh come now! Yes, the gold chain, too. He removed his sunglasses as if he were taking off his clothes. Under blond eyebrows he flaunted chocolate brown eyes and an amazing smile with a line of straight white, and now I confirmed his dimples. I never trusted dimples; there is always a joke inside them at the other person's expense. In time I expected to learn the nature of Johnnie Banghart's joke, although I already suspected it. The man was as fresh as a peppermint, with a smile designed only for women. He set down the two pineapples in the center of Desiree's Queen Victoria tea table, and pulled out a chair for me, as if I were the guest of honor to an assembly of waiting dignitaries.

Declarations from a cuckoo clock greeted us. ßGladys had set up a small round table with three chairs. We were the entire party? On the tea table next to a bowl of bachelor button flowers and bleeding hearts sat a heaped-to-overflowing platter of warm golden scones exuding a buttery aroma. "The beautiful Mrs. Stoakes in now one of us, Gladys," sang out Johnnie Banghart. "Are we ready for tea?"

"Almost ready," Gladys Desiree sang as she dashed back presumably into her bedroom and then returned, toe-dancing out through the door in an array of reds. "The colors of love," she said, just as Annabelle once told me. Here was Gladys, dress, hair bow, beads, spangled earrings, lipstick, rouge. Red red red. She dashed into the kitchen and then out again carrying a silver dish by its long stem, holding it high in the air. "Chocolate-covered strawberries. We must have strawberries; they express the contours of my heart." She

batted her eyelashes. Setting the dish down next to the bachelors-buttons, “Now then,” she clapped her hands together gleefully and her body bounced, “let us all sit down.”

“Gladys planned this little welcome home party because the lady is crazy about me.”

“I find Johnnie irresistible,” said Gladys, brushing the back of her hand against his cheek.

“That’s because I am a notorious flirt. I flirt with Gladys every chance I can.”

“You’re such a sweet boy,” she tapped his shoulder.

“Anyone who calls me a boy has won me over.”

“That’s because you want to remain a boy, a naughty boy,” she said.

“And you are still a young girl, Gladys. I’ve got you all figured out, Desiree. You are your name: Desiree,” dropping down to a seductive whisper. And then he kissed her on the side of her neck after which she nearly collapsed in her chair, and he wagged a teasing finger at her as if to say: No more; remember, too much is not good for you.

Gladys thrust a coquettish shoulder at him, “I forgot the sugar.” She jumped up, pirouetted, and left the room. Johnnie Banghart quickly pulled out a small flask of whiskey and poured its contents into Gladys’ iced tea. He glanced over at me and winked, “Vodka.”

Gladys returned as quickly as possible. “I don’t want to miss anything.”

“How long have you lived here, Mr. Banghart?” I asked.

“Ten years. The house was part of an inheritance from my first wife, Matilda. I’m not really into antiques except for Gladys here.”

“Oh, you dear boy,” Desiree said returning with the sugar; she giggled and squirmed and flushed. “Be careful with that kind of talk, Johnnie. You know what it does to me.”

“It’s doing it right now, Gladys. Enjoy yourself.” And he patted her hand.

She turned to me. “I should leave all my money to Johnnie. No one gives me the pleasure he does.”

“Have you been to Trapperman’s Restaurant yet, Mrs. Stoakes?”

“Yes.”

“That’s my restaurant. Mine with my partner, Mike Trapperman. Do you like it?”

“I find it robust.”

“Robust? Robust! That’s rich. You’re absolutely right; it is. And I’m robust as well. Do I look like I’m fifty-five years old? Now you tell me, do I?”

“Take off fifteen years,” shouted Gladys, opening her vivid red lips and revealing her large pink gums and tiny stone teeth. She was giddy, looking sideways out of first one eye, then the other.

Then she spotted the two pineapples on the table.

“One is for you, Gladys, and the other is for our new neighbor Rhea.” I was surprised he remembered me from that fast introduction before he left to catch his airplane.

“Ooh Johnnie; thank you.” She leaned over very far almost kissing him on the lips, “You’re so thoughtful. No one has been so good to me since Mr. Lapper.”

“Careful, Gladys, you’ll upset yourself talking about your great lost love.”

She backed away and pulled up straight. “You are perfectly right. Thank you, Johnnie. Now then, tell us, have you been up to your usual mischief?”

“I met a young woman on the Islands, if that’s what you mean. She’s an absolute daredevil, full of fun. I want to marry her. Get ready, ladies: she‘s twenty-three. Are you shocked?”

Gladys jerked her head soberly. “No, I’m not shocked.”

Well, I was.

“She goes for me, Gladys; so I must have something. We have a few problems, of course, but—”

“Grab what you can get now,” Gladys said with a guttural fierceness that startled us, and caused us to stop and stare at her as her mouth turned into a red gash.

We sipped our tea, ate our scones, and let the air clear. Then Johnnie Banghart talked about Hawaii. “It’s very romantic there, and I’m a romantic guy. When you get married, Gladys, go to Hawaii for your honeymoon. You’ll make love under the stars, right out there on your private veranda with the palm trees swaying above you and the silver moon sliding by. And you won’t have a stitch of clothing on, but no one will be able to see you except your lover. And he will certainly be looking.”

“Oh!” She blushed anew and giggled and squirmed.

“Yes, he will be looking. All over you, Gladys Desiree.”

“Oooh, you’re a naughty man, Johnnie Banghart. Naughty, naughty, naughty.” The blood rushed to her face. She hiked up her shoulders and shivered with delight.

“What’s naughty about it? You’ll be able to see him naked, too.”

“Ooooh!” And she jumped up and rushed out of the room.

“Naked, naked, naked!” he shouted after her, laughing.

“Where is she going?” I asked.

“She’s going into the bathroom to calm down. This is her idea of dirty language. It gets her going.”

We sipped our tea and passed the preserves to each other for the scones. I did not want him to detect the trouble Haiden and I were having.

“Gladys tells me you’re a writer.”

“Yes.”

“Have you published anything?”

“My writing instructor has taken me under his wing. He tells his agent about me, that I am coming along.”

“And what does the agent say?”

“He agrees.”

“Good for you. Mr. Stoakes must be proud of you.”

“He opened a bottle of champagne when the agent expressed an interest.”

“Did you finish the champagne?”

I laughed. “Haiden did.”

“The entire bottle?”

“He was quite a sight. That was the only time I ever saw him almost drunk, well, in fact, he was drunk.”

Johnnie and I began to talk about the neighborhood, specifically the mailman. We agreed the mailman was a busybody who probably should be appeased from time to time with small tidbits of gossip. Then I ran out of conversation; I really had nothing to say to this neighbor whom I approved of less and less every moment. What, in God’s name, was Gladys doing so long in the bathroom? “Well, I’ll be on my way. This was very nice, Mr. Banghart. Goodbye.”

I left Gladys' house and retreated to my porch. My elderly neighbor who came from a more genteel era, who walked in a garden of flowers, who talked from a high moral position about Celia Vortek's guilt, had this day slipped off her pedestal as she exposed her titillated interest in the prurient. And my other neighbor, her Don Juan, was even worse for leading her on mercilessly. At that moment I felt close to my husband and questioned if I had been too severe in my actions: retiring, buying this house, registering for college—all the while that he was in trouble. Well, I couldn't turn back the clock now.

I walked home quickly, having wasted an hour of productive writing time. I could still salvage the afternoon with two good hours of work.

I adjusted myself in front of my computer when suddenly Gladys' door slammed, and Johnnie Banghart came swinging over to my porch. "You forgot your pineapple," he said loudly. He planted the prickly fruit on my long rectangular table and said, "I want to apologize. I'm afraid I shocked you. In the future, I promise to be more careful. Do you mind if I sit awhile and start all over?"

"Well—"

"Thank you."

Resigned, I gestured for him to sit down.

He stretched out his legs next to the pineapple. "So how did you come to be a writer?"

Why didn't he take off his sunglasses? It was disconcerting not to see his eyes.

I said, "Secretarial work is not everybody's calling. I retired."

"I can appreciate that." He smiled behind his sunglasses.

"I drove home and told my husband that I registered for college."

“Was your husband instantly agreeable?”

“I expected him to be surprised.”

“But you also expected that he would wrap his arms around you and say, ‘It’s about time.’”

“Yes.”

“And did he?”

I looked at Johnnie.

Suddenly we heard the neighborhood children coming home from school. Johnnie looked in their direction. “Friday afternoons are the best time of the entire workweek.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the floodgates of an entire week of restraints open up. Children rush outdoors, open their arms to the wind and space and colors in the fresh air; they see kites in the sky even though none are flying, smell ocean waves even though they live many miles from the sea, and know liberation even though it is temporary. The outcome of this ritual performed thousands upon thousands of time is that during the rest of their lives, come Friday afternoons, they will celebrate their reclaimed freedom. That, my dear Mrs. Stoakes, is the origin of the cocktail party.”

I could not help laughing.

“Celia Vortek understands Friday afternoons at three o’clock,” and he looked across the street, nodding his head for me to look. “She’s sitting out there somewhere in the darkness of her porch. Now watch! Here come the children. And there she is, you can see her now coming forward with her basket of candy. Look how they come screaming onto her lawn, waving to her and reaching up as she tosses the candy. It comes raining down on them. They’re rushing forward, pouncing on the candy to beat out their friends. The hot urgency of it

fires their cheeks. They're jumping up and down, waving to her and reaching up for more to rain down on them. Handful after handful, it comes. Look at Celia; she's jumping up and down herself. Now, she's turning her basket upside down to show them that it's finally empty. The kiddies moan that the sport has ended; they count their candies and continue on their way home. And she settles back in the deep shade of her front porch so that you can hardly see her. The little ritual has been taking place every Friday afternoon for as many years as I've lived here."

"She sounds like she's reliving her youth," I said casually.

"I don't think she ever left it," said Johnnie without a trace of sarcasm. "She is one of them. Maybe her first husband was the right man for her. Somewhere along the way, she was detoured by others."

"But we have to take responsibility for our mistakes," I muttered.

"She was married twice."

"And I, three times."

"Whenever I look at younger women, maybe I am trying to relive my youth or want to do it better this time."

I listened to Johnnie Banghart ramble on and on about being a kid again. "It is my lost Eden," he said. I wondered if it was the same for Haiden? Haiden's life was filled with unrealized dreams. His dreams, his y life, disappointed him, he disappointed himself. Johnnie's expectancies were probably also verylarge. And my own dreams? What were they? To be a writer? I can still have my dream if I fight for it.

"Mrs. Stoakes, I believe your thoughts are elsewhere."

“Mr. Banghart, why are you attracted to a twenty-three-year-old woman? Why aren’t you where you belong?”

“Where I belong? You mean with a woman closer to my own age? I have no complaints against older women. myself.” He leaned forward and finally removed his sunglasses. “I have a need to become twenty-three again or to remain twenty-three, as I’m not the most mature fellow in the world. I still want to play.” He winked and his dimples deepened.

“Maybe older women have lost their desire to play,” he said. “Or permitted it to be drummed out of them.”

Suddenly, Haiden’s car pulled into the driveway. The car door popped open, and Haiden came up the steps. At seeing us, he stopped abruptly. Would his old obsession about Mr. Valentine spring into action?

“Well, hello, everyone,” he said cheerfully enough.

“Haiden, this is Johnnie Banghart, our next-door neighbor come home from the Hawaiian Islands.”

“The Hawaiian Islands?”

“It’s a veeeery romantic place, Haiden.”

The two men shook hands, and Haiden said, “I’m just going in to pack a quick bag. One of the fellas has a cabin up at Lake Arrowhead, and a group of us decided to go up there for the weekend to drink beer and do whatever men do without women around.” As he scurried indoors, the vent in the rear of his jacket flared out over an ample rump.

Johnnie looked at my surprised face. “I think it’s time for me to leave,” and he started to get up.

“No. Stay awhile.” I demanded.

“But—”

“Stay!” I grabbed his arm so hard that he almost fell down.

“All right.” He sat down.

“Thank you.” I inhaled deeply. “So, tell me about all your wives.”

“The short version or the long one?”

“The short version first.”

“Wife number one, Matilda, died too young, which wasn’t very nice of her. Wife number two was domineering, so I left. On the other hand, number three did not think I was ambitious enough so she left.”

“Children? Do you have any?” I asked.

“Nope. I’m the child. But now, number four wife-to-be, the young thing from Hawaii, may make up for that character flaw and force me to grow up. She thinks I’m capable; she looks up to me.”

“That’s important, isn’t it—her looking up to you?”

“That’s everything. Can you imagine how much of it I get from a twenty-three-year-old?”

“Couldn’t a woman closer to your age look up to you just as well?”

“Naaah!” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “I couldn’t get away with it. I don’t have enough for an older woman.”

Haiden suddenly came through the door carrying a duffel bag and wearing an orange one-piece jumpsuit; he looked enormous in it. He mumbled something like, “Goodbye.”

In silence, Johnnie and I watched him drive away.

“Do you have any children, Rhea?”

I shook my head, no. “One day I said to Haiden, ‘The house is too quiet. We need something alive running around here. A dog. Or maybe a baby.’”

“And your Haiden responded by saying—?”

“My Haiden responded by saying, ‘What if we have a baby and afterward you realize that all you wanted was a dog.”

Silence.

“Would you like to join me for dinner over at my house, Rhea?”

“Yes.”

30

Johnnie Banghart mixed a good martini— better than Haiden’s. He played Gershwin on the piano, and cooked up a terrific clam and shrimp pasta. After I drank my second martini and watched him remove a hot sourdough bread from the oven, we sat down to dinner in his dining room that was covered with large photographs of a female jazz singer in front of a band. "Matilda was very beautiful, as you can see.” His eyes traveled around the room. “I hung all these photos of her after I moved back into the house. Other than that, I haven’t gotten around to changing anything.”

“You don’t want to.”

He cut the crusty sourdough into large blocks and set them in the breadbasket. “I wanted to grow old with Matilda. Now, I don’t want to grow old at all. I’m going the other way. I want to be a high school football hero again. I want to find Matilda again.” He poured the wine, reaching over the table to fill my wine glass and his arms were muscular and suntanned. “Do you want to know what’s preventing me from marrying a twenty-three year-old? My partner Mike Trapperman, who also happens to be my uncle.” I imagined the same muscularity and tanning on Johnnie’s chest and legs. “He bought the restaurant from the family and brought me in as his partner. My mother financed my half and that tied me to her brother.

You see, before she died she wanted to make sure I would be all right; she knew I wanted to play, that I didn't want responsibilities. She thought Mike would be a good influence on me; he was very responsible." I began to meander over Johnnie's torso, over his chest, his shoulders, down his back to his buttocks. "We worked the restaurant hard and expanded it four times. But now I want Friday afternoons. I need money and time to play," he said. "That means selling my half of the partnership. Mike won't buy me out. He claims he doesn't have the money. His excuse is his four daughters; all of them are in college and he's paying for a lot of tuition."

"Can't you sell your half of the partnership to someone else?" I was shocked and embarrassed by my attraction to him. The weakness in my knees spread to an over-all weakness. Haiden never aroused me this way. I had assumed the deficiency was on my side. But now, I sipped my wine and Johnnie sipped his, and a blond curl fell onto his forehead.

"Mike says he doesn't want me selling to someone else, or bringing in an unknown quantity. Besides, he thinks I will do something foolish with the money and end up penniless. He says Trapperman's is my security and he refuses to discuss it."

Johnnie leaned back and tossed his arm over the arch of his chair. He dangled his half-filled wine glass. "When Mike finds out that Jennifer is twenty-three years old, I won't have a ghost of a chance that he'd free me. My mother's voice will be ringing in his ears."

Annabelle had wondered what it would be like to have an affair, and now such thoughts rolled over me. Here was a handsome and sexy man—and he knew it, which simply added to his attractiveness—a garrulous lighthearted man who genuinely liked women and made

them feel wonderful and desirable. So different from Haiden. Haiden was one big sour pickle. I laughed out.

"What's so funny?"

"Those pickles in the jars at your restaurant," I shook my head. "They remind me of Haiden." Then I held out my empty wine glass.

Johnnie re-filled it and laughed. "So he's a pickle, eh?"

"Haiden would not approve of this dinner," I said. "He would frown and later reprimand me for its tawdriness." Oh, I was chuckling now.

"Your Haiden seemed approving enough of me on your porch."

"That was not the real Haiden," I winked.

"You mean the real Haiden would hold himself above an honorable emotion like jealousy?"

"Civilized behavior is the bedrock of our society." I laughed and laughed.

Johnnie put down his wine glass and waited patiently with his soft brown eyes on me until I calmed down. Oh, I was feeling the wine and I was definitely feeling Johnnie's presence. Without meeting his gaze, I said, "So what exactly does Uncle Mike think you should do? Avoid fun altogether?"

"That's about it. A man of my age, according to him, is too old for fun. I should be sensible and practical and devote my life to work and family. But, Rhea, I don't have a family, and if I don't look for fun I'll end up like Celia Vortek."

"Like Celia? Which means exactly what?"

"Putting aside her candy tossing, she's the living dead."

"I presume you'd rather end up like Gladys Desiree?"

"Given a choice, yes."

"Why, Johnnie Banghart, I thought you were merely taking pity on Gladys, humoring her. That's not it at all. You admire Gladys."

"I do indeed. She puts up a good fight. Why, she still has a game in her eyes. But Celia—ooh, look into those eyes; and you're looking into a soul in mourning."

"Gladys says Celia stole a lover from her."

"That's what she says." He lifted one eyebrow.

"You don't believe her?" I asked.

"It's not easy." He laughed.

"But there must be something to the story," I said.

"Sure. There was even a scandal, according to Matilda."

"I heard there was a scandal!" I perked up.

Johnnie thrust the palms of his hands toward me to stop oncoming questions. "I don't know anything about it."

"That's too bad," I said.

"Writer's curiosity?"

"Absolutely." I said.

He tilted his head back for the last of his wine. "Where do you get your ideas and characters?"

"From everyone I meet," I said.

"Does that include me?"

"You're first on my list," I said.

"The two old gals should be first. You'll have some fun there."

"Fun? That is the bottom line for you. That's your logo."

"Why not?" He leaned forward and said in an undeniably seductive voice, "Are you interested in having some fun, Rhea Stoakes?"

"I think I'll be getting on home now."

"No dessert?" His voice was full of dessert.

Regardless of the martini and the wine and the peroxided curl and my aroused state, I knew who I was—a married woman—and Johnnie was interested in a twenty-three-year-old. Ridiculous man. His uncle was right to watch over him.

"Good night, Johnnie Banghart," I said.

31

Since Haiden had gone out of town with the fellas, I carried my dinner out to the hammock: a toasted cheese sandwich and a glass of warm milk and enjoyed the summer night until quite late. Not a car in sight. The street lamps stood guard as every household slept. The lawns glistened with wet moon glow and snails drew silvery trails through it. Cats crouched under parked cars and stared at me. Suddenly, across the street, Celia Vortek's windows blinked yellow; her entire house lighted up. I clearly saw her sit down at a large, old-fashioned upright piano; and without looking at the keys she began playing. I was absolutely hypnotized. Pumping her hands up and down, this round

little woman with a man’s haircut thrust her face upward in a profile of beatific reverence. Was she playing religious music?

I watched her until quite late. And then decided to sleep indoors. The house was bathed in stillness, darker than ever, full of shadows and black pockets. It was not a house where love lived. I moved through the rooms flipping on wall switches. I entered the bedroom and found the air cloying. The bed filled the entire room, a bed that looked grotesque. I slipped on my most beautiful nightgown, combed my hair, and splashed myself with perfume. I wondered if Johnnie Banghart found me attractive. I opened the window and inhaled deeply as if to resuscitate myself, and then lay down on the bed. It was a bad sleep. I dreamed I was hobbling around on a crutch because I had only one leg. I asked people all around me how I lost my leg. No one knew.

The following morning, Saturday, the children bicycled up and down the sidewalk, while I tended to my writing ideas, and Gladys tended to her English garden, and across the street through Celia’s window the television flickered with a cartoon program. Johnnie Banghart's screen door suddenly slammed. I jumped at the sound. He stepped out onto his porch wearing a black and white Hawaiian kimono, short sleeved so his muscles could breathe, and he was carrying the newspaper under one arm that also held a mug of coffee. He fell into a chair and tossed the newspaper on a table. I turned back to my work. Ordinarily I would never have glanced up from my writing; ordinarily, my focus was intense, and let all comers stay away — Annabelle knew never to call before eleven-thirty. Then unexpectedly, Johnnie moved over to his half wall on his porch, perched himself on the ledge, and faced me. I pretended full

absorption in my writing. Yet out of the corner of my eye, I saw his muscular legs swinging loose and his powerful hand curled around that mug of steaming black coffee. He was watching me, and I knew his eyes were mischievous. I tossed my arms into the air and breathed in deeply as if I had come to a chapter break. I stood up to pour myself coffee from my own little coffee maker. My hand was shaking. How dare he behave like this; I was a married woman.

"Hi! Sleep all right?" he asked.

"Bad dream."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Can't remember it."

"One night when I was dreaming," he started, "I made this very loud noise and scared Matilda awake. She bolted upright and listened to me for a few moments. Deciding I was having a nightmare, she shook me.

'Are you all right?' Matilda asked.

'Sure,' I said.

'But that sound?' she said.

'I told myself a joke and I was laughing.'

‘You were laughing?’

‘Yes.’

'Tell me the joke,' she prodded.

'Who remembers dreams?'"

I smiled at the absurdity of his little story. He was being so kind. He understood my problem with Haiden. And I needed understanding.

"Are you going to be with your young lady friend today?" I asked.

"Tonight, not today. Saturday mornings and afternoons at the restaurant are our busiest time." He tilted his head back and gulped a swig of his coffee. I watched his throat as he swallowed the coffee. Then I returned to my writing; and he swung his legs back to the inner side of his porch. He moved over to a small table and pulled the rubber band off his newspaper. He played with the rubber band between his fingers as he quietly read his newspaper and sipped his coffee. The only sound came from my computer, a soft clacking. Eventually, he stood up, “See you later,” and went indoors.

All that Saturday afternoon, I sat out on the porch finding it hard to concentrate. Celia sat out on her porch. And Gladys on hers. Periodically Gladys sauntered through her English garden. Celia was too far away and set back too deeply in her dark porch for me to see her eyes. She waved to me whenever I looked her way. And I waved back. She seemed like a child waiting for a playmate. Eventually, Celia disappeared; Gladys went indoors; and I entered my house to prepare my singular dinner. Only then did I think of Haiden at all. I tried to picture him at the cabin being a hail fellow, but I saw him as a preacher.

Sunday promised to be a repetition of Saturday, except that Johnnie escorted his darling Jennifer out of his house and down the steps, glanced over to my porch, and brought the young thing over to meet me. Young? I checked for braces. Her skirt was too short, her blouse too tight, and she stood slightly pigeon-toed. What was this: pedophilia? The sight of them together sickened me. My disrespect for Johnnie not only returned, it augmented.

He looked into my eyes, read my thoughts, and blushed as he introduced this girl to me, young enough to be his daughter or mine.

Then the girl herself blushed. I blurted out, “What are you two kids going to do today?”

Johnnie laughed nervously. “We’re going to the circus. Can you remember the last time you went to the circus?”

“Yesterday.”

Jennifer’s mouth dropped open.

“This is a new day. Come with us,” said Johnnie.

Then Jennifer smiled and said, “Sure, c’mon. You’ll have fun. The circus’s a great place.”

I retorted, “This neighborhood provides a sufficient number of spectacles for me.”

Johnnie frowned.

Jennifer looked confused, then smiled, “Oh, you’re talking about the two old ladies. Johnnie told me all about them. Sure, they’re a circus, all right.”

32

Haiden returned chipper from his weekend retreat with the fellas. Apparently the camaraderie had done him a world of good. He cooked for the two of us, and we ate our meals together—although I did not enjoy watching him gorge himself. He even spoke. But as the week progressed, he began to slip. By the time Friday rolled around, he had regressed completely. On Saturday morning, Haiden drove off without a word.

“Annabelle, let’s have lunch,” I said.

“You bit my head off the last time I telephoned. Is everything all right?”

“No.”

“Let’s meet at Trapperman’s again.”

A busboy dropped a tray of dishes, but the noise simply blended into the general cacophony of the crowded restaurant where waiters and waitresses rushed around balancing trays heaped with sandwiches too large for any human mouth and calling out orders to the cadences of barkers hawking their wares at a fair. Getting our usual booth seemed almost hopeless until Annie made eye contact with Sol.

“Annie, it’s not any kind of a marriage anymore.” I almost hollered over the noise. “He drives off.”

“I don’t understand, Rhea. The man is on the Social Action Committee. He’s always preaching about the sanctity of marriage.” Suddenly she held her breadth. “Rhea, is it possible—?”

“What?”

“Maybe he’s coming out of the closet as a gay man.”

“No!” I knocked over my water glass.

Sol rushed over and brought a busboy with him to wipe up the spillage.

Annabelle ordered, not taking her eyes off of me. “Sol, we’ll have club sandwiches, coffee, and lemon cream pie if you have it.”

Sol snapped his fingers for the busboy to bring fresh water glasses.

“I should take Fred here on his birthday. On the other hand, I could give Fred a birthday party in our garage and that would be okay with him. Everything is okay with him; everything about everybody is okay with him. ‘Live and let live’ is his motto. If I dress up or don’t, it’s all the same to him. I can punch him in the stomach and he’ll love

it, rub pie all over his face, and he'll ask for a spoon. Look, Rhea, I'm sorry I said anything. I was out of line." Suddenly she narrowed her eyes. "Isn't that Haiden down at the other end in the corner booth?"

"What! Here?" I waited for the crowd of heads and shoulders to make an opening.

"And isn't that Katie Shiner with him?"

"What do you mean?" Everything blurred.

"Keep looking."

Haiden reached across the Formica tabletop for Katie Shiner's hand. A big smile spread across her face.

"Maybe he's consoling her," Annie suggested.

"He's the one who's upset. Not her."

Haiden stood up halfway, leaned over, and kissed her quickly on the lips.

"It's just a quick kiss, Rhea, merely a token of affection," said Annabelle.

My heart jumped as he withdrew a small velvet box from his lapel pocket.

"She's opening it. Oh, my God, Rhea, it's a ring."

The busboy arrived with the fresh water glasses. I dropped my eyes and stared at the bouncing ice cubes. A ring? What for? What were they doing here? Haiden abhors restaurants like this. Don't look up; keep your eyes on the ice cubes. I was witnessing something not intended for my eyes. My face burned with embarrassment. I had caught him and I wanted to hide. I felt exposed, naked. No, no, no. Something was wrong here. Why should I hide? Haiden was the one committing the sin, not me. And then I felt it, the rumbling and my cheeks aflame. The top of my head was ready to pop off.

"I've got to get out of here, Annie."

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve just got to get out of here.”

“Come to my house. Can you drive your car?”

I nodded, yes.

“Ladies, is something wrong?” Sol called after us.

I ran as fast as I could through the door. Which way? Turn left? Out to the parking lot. Where was the car? I couldn’t find the car. Yes, the brick wall, you parked facing the brick wall. Open the car door. It won’t open. The key, the key. Yes. Now sit down, turn on the ignition. Shift into first. Look behind. Now floor the pedal—WHAM!

“Lady, lady, are you all right?”

“She ran right into that brick wall.”

“Was she trying to kill herself?”

“She must have gone crazy.”

“No, no, her foot just slipped.”

“Is she unconscious?”

“I think she’s crying.”

Annabelle pounded on the window. “Rhea, are you all right?”

I lifted my head and started the engine again.

Annabelle hollered, “See if it’ll go in reverse.”

Annabelle drove behind me. The tingling. The light-headedness. The numbness setting in like a drug. “Oh it was all a dream, only a dream. I’m eighteen years old; I never met Haiden Stoakes. I never married him. Everything is ahead of me, yes everything, and in their normal order. I will graduate college, fall in love and marry a sweet young man who will be my friend, and we will have a family of beautiful children to love. And summer after summer we will vacation

all over the world. Yes, I only dreamed this whole terrible thing with Haiden. My entire adult life is still waiting, stretched out in front of me, long, delicious, wonderful. Rhea, you only suffered one of your bad dreams. Oh, it is so good to wake up. I feel peaceful and optimistic about the future. What's that in my rearview mirror? Annie's eyes. They're so wide; she's looking at me, so desperately concerned.

"No, no. Then I did marry Haiden Stoakes. We did live together — fifteen years. I did support him through two academic degrees. To what purpose? So that I could continue to support him for the rest of his life while he indulged all his fancies. I don't think he's disabled at all. It was a deceit, a grand deceit. He planned everything before he even met me and I was merely his ready pigeon. He received a free education from me, room and board, and could look forward to a lifetime of affairs with different young women. Rhea, old girl, you did very well; you set him up royally, and all at your expense. You waited and waited for your college education; and you never would have started it at all if you had not taken it upon yourself to do something. Oh this pain in my heart. Where are my children? My lost children? Drive faster. Press down hard on the gas pedal. There are lots of young Katies to be taken in by an ascot around the neck of an older sophisticated man. Did you give her a line, Haiden, about being the misunderstood husband, the poor unhappy husband? That car is trying to cut in front of me. No sir; not any more; no one cuts in front of me anymore. I've had enough of that. So what did you tell her, Haiden? That you endure a shrew of a wife, a difficult, demanding, uncooperative woman who suffocates your spirit? You told her you never intended to have an affair. After all, you believe in the sanctity of marriage. Did you tell her that, Haiden? Yes, I know you told her

that. You told her all about your very high principles, didn't you, Haiden? Those drivers are in my way. Give 'em the horn; that's it; hold your fist against the steering wheel. I drove you into her arms, didn't I, Haiden? And she gave you comfort. Isn't she one of the pack, Haiden? You called them "loose women roaming like wild dogs sniffing around the life mates of other women." Yes, your very words; strong words; you are so good with words, Haiden; you certainly worked them to make me do whatever you wanted. Maybe you should have been the writer, Haiden. So what problem did you invent for her? Because you surely needed to resort to invention. What line of bunk did you deliver to her, Haiden? What was your problem in our marriage, Haiden, old boy? Was it your failure and retreat? All the cars are moving into other lanes; good, they are staying away from me. I'm going to accelerate. Sound the horn in one continuous blast. Whaaaam!"

33

An ambulance came. I was in the hospital for observation for two days.

Carlotta came to see me. She was concerned.

"You're making too much of this, Carlotta."

"I should have made more of your matching up with Haiden. I thought you would take care of yourself, but I see that the folks got to you."

"The folks also got to George," I said.

“Yes, they did. But at least I chose him.”

Silence.

“I often wonder how the folks themselves got matched up,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Rhea, when you look at married couples, do you sometimes wonder what attracted them to each other? Some seemed like such an unlikely match.”

“Do you think the marriage of our parents was arranged?”

“We’re in America. People choose for themselves.”

“Did you, Rhea? I think there are lots of factors at work when a couple matches up. Our parents were unsuited to each other. Maybe in the beginning, with a short courtship, they saw in the other a perfect choice.”

“What about you, Carlotta? George was one kind of person turned into another. From the artistic type to the MBA: a highly forced issue. Dad has his way.”

“Your friends Annabelle and Fred are well matched. They didn’t sett out. We sold out, but were given a second chance. You have to take the second chance all by yourself.”

“Carlotta, did you see among my so-called beaus any man who was Mr. Right for me?”

“I knew enough to say your match should have been with someone sensitive and with a good sense of play, someone like Mr. Valentine.”

“Oh, you remember him?” I said.

“Of course. I had a thing for him, but he was always busy looking at you, Rhea.”

32

When Carlotta left, I thought about my marriage. You were a foolish woman, Rhea, supporting your husband all these years. He concocted a package of afflictions and you bent over backward with patience and understanding. Or, more accurately, you merely continued on in your state of semi-consciousness. You have been semi-conscious most of your life, as an unthinking good girl. You listened to your well-meaning parents but, wait a moment, don't palm it off on them. They were simply taken in the way you were. How could anyone know that your husband would turn out to be nothing more than a gigolo living off your efforts? Oh you were good to him. You were a fool. You accomplished a feat of foolishness. Alliteration. I barked out, "FF." And I began to laugh. Laugh followed laugh until the tears squirted out of my eyes.

I was driving my now banged-up car to the old neighborhood where Annabelle and Fred still lived. Annie reached in through the open window and put her arm around my shoulder. "How about a good stiff drink?"

"FF." I barked at her and doubled up with laughter.

Fred came out and greeted us, a big teddy bear of a man, burly-chested, soft-bellied, and needing a haircut and shave. Maybe Annie should be worried about Fred's fidelity; he has all the signs: shaggy, whiskers, tire around his belly. But Fred has always looked like that.

"Rhea, are you all right?" said Fred.

"She's not all right, Fred. Get her a good stiff drink."

"My God, what happened to your car, Rhea?"

"Fred, the drink."

"Sure. Right away."

We all walked inside. I sat down and heard the two of them discussing me as if I were their patient. I stared at my hands clasped together in my lap, fingers inter-laced like those of a good girl, for yes, if nothing else I had been a very good girl. I burst out laughing again. Annabelle was explaining to Fred what had happened. Fred looked at her and then at me and then at her. He came over, sat down beside me and said, "I'm so sorry, Rhea."

"Get her the drink, Fred."

"Oh, that's right." We women watched him leave the room.

"Now listen to me, Rhea," Annie said. "You're staying here for a couple of days. I don't think it's good for you to be in your house right now."

"Annie's right. You're staying with us, Rhea."

"Why did he do it, Fred?"

"I don't know, Rhea. Any number of reasons. Maybe midlife male thing."

Annabelle threw it up to him accusingly, "I beg your pardon. Midlife male thing? Does that mean it's okay? Is Rhea supposed to sit back and wait for Haiden to work out his little feelings? What about her feelings?" She turned to me, "Rhea, you're not going to let Haiden get away with this. Fred will fix you up with some gorgeous man and when Haiden sees you with him, he'll come to his senses."

Fred said meekly, "I don't think I know any single men who would be suitable."

"You'll find someone. Rent him if you have to."

"I date another man? Absolutely not. I'm still a married woman. I believe in the sanctity of marriage." And I burst out laughing harder than ever.

Annie put her arm around me. “Where’s her drink, Fred?”

At six o’clock that evening, Haiden’s car sat at the curb, ready for a quick getaway. I pulled into our garage, not bothering to check the damage on the front end of my car from the accident. I went indoors and removed a big pot of chicken soup from the refrigerator that Haiden had prepared and I placed it on the stove to heat. I prepared a salad and added some croutons. Haiden lumbered in. How was I going to confront him? I felt like an attack dog about to spring. But suddenly, suddenly, I tied tourniquets everywhere. I would say nothing. It gave me an unaccustomed feeling of power, of having the upper hand. I would watch his dramatics in performance, the machinations of this master schemer, knowing what I now knew. I had time to choose my options, to plan carefully.

Haiden sat down and without a word began to wolf down everything in sight. I listened to him chew the croutons in the salad, swallow the soup with bubbly slurps, and smack his lips as he sucked the meat off the chicken bones. He guzzled the wine. He finished the remains in all the serving dishes. He never looked up once to notice that I hadn’t served myself, that my plate was shining and empty. After he left the room he headed toward his study, and I ate my dinner.

After dinner, I washed the dishes. I pulled off my rubber gloves and spread out the damp towel. The kitchen was orderly. I turned off the light and stepped outdoors for a cooling walk through the neighborhood. I felt as though I were in the eye of a hurricane.

Lawn sprinklers jerked back and forth. An old man aimed his hose up to the treetops, washing off the warm dust of a hot day. Laughter sailed out from dark porches. Men played cards in front of an open window. A family conducted a bible study meeting and sang

religious hymns. A teenage girl sat alone in her bedroom, reading. A couple behind a window shade embraced; he began very gently to unbutton her blouse. All of these people were among the living who still thought good thoughts and felt pleasant sensations.

Returning to the house, I entered the bedroom to find Haiden snoring—ironically the affirming sound of a clear conscience. I removed my clothes and stepped into the shower imagining Katie and Haiden already there, washing each other lovingly. Quickly, with my eyes shut, I went through my routine, dried off, and scurried into the bedroom. But on approaching our bed I imagined the two of them already lying there wrapped in each other's arms. I ran out of the room.

I heard them laughing as I rushed out to the porch and threw myself on the hammock. At that moment I knew how much I hated my husband. Hated his golden tongue, his biblical superiority, hated his cold eye, his spidery fingers, his limp penis, his sick-smelling vitamin pills, and his cheap wine collection, there was no end to what I hated about him. I retreated to my porch, lay on my hammock all night, tossing and turning, hating him.

The next morning, a hot Sunday, I rose up from my sleepless night on the porch feeling prickly and irritable. I staggered indoors to the kitchen, still wearing yesterday's clothes. I poured myself a glass of ice water and pressed it against the vein in my pulsating temple. Oh, God, not another migraine!

Haiden sat at one end of the kitchen table eating chocolate cupcakes. I squinted at him through sandy eyes. How could I ever have loved this man, this bloated unkempt man? I no longer even recognized him.

From far away his voice filtered through. “I’m going for a drive.” His mouth was ugly when he talked. You’re going for a drive, Haiden? Why bother to inform me? Words, words, words, yak, yak, yak, yak, yak. Go off and play with your lady friend, Haiden. Do whatever you do with her. I need time to think about your Midlife Crisis that started years ago.

As soon as I heard him drive off and the automatic garage door drop—*thud*, I marched straight to the linen closet and yanked out a large pillow, a sheet, and a quilt. I carried them out to the porch and stashed them in the small cupboard. Never again did I intend to sleep in the same house with Haiden Stoakes.

The students left early in the morning for the campus. Seeing me sleeping out on the porch, they tiptoed past me surmising my relationship had accelerated from a lovers’ quarrel. They knew I had left Haiden.

33

Gladys shouted at the mailman from her front porch. “Every one of my beaus was nicer than you are, and certainly better looking,” She tossed a throw-away newspaper at him, turned around, and disappeared indoors.

The mailman finished his delivery at Gladys Desiree’s house and walked over to my porch where I was pounding on my computer asking it questions about the phenomenon named “Midlife Crisis”. Did only men seem to go through it? When does it start? Earlier in some people? Did Haiden feel it before he met me? When he failed at acting? Is that why he listened to my father? Was that it? Well, what

about me? I didn't know what I wanted before I met Haiden. Later I realized that I wanted to do something more with my life.

"That woman's a card, a real card," the mailman laughed, thumbing backward towards Gladys' house.

I looked up, annoyed at the interference.

"The other day she gave me a cigar," he went on. "Today she's angry with me again. It's just like I told you." He shook his head and laughed internally. "You don't know the half of it, Mrs. Stoakes. Years ago she made her first pass at me, and I turned her down. Since then, she's been getting even with me. But in the last year or so, she's been buttering up. She's getting more desperate. I haven't changed; all I give her is a thank-you for the cigar."

"Obviously her beaus treated her more flatteringly than you do." I was disgusted this morning and did not welcome male company.

"Her beaus! What beaus? I've been around for over thirty years, and I've never seen a sign of any."

"You're here for five minutes during the daytime. Beaus generally arrive in the evening."

"Well, I've never seen anything that looked remotely like a personal letter either. And that's because I can't remember when she ever received one."

"How can you remember so well about one person's mail over so long a stretch of time?"

"Because I feel a little sorry for her; I was kind of hoping there actually were some beaus. But if you ask me, there never were any even before my time. Do you have any idea what she looked like when she was in her forties, when a woman still has her looks? Gladys could have stopped a clock even then." He shook his head. "God bless her. Now you take Celia Vortek across the street in that spooky house. She

was a real cutie, still is. And she's a nice lady. The whole neighborhood likes her, especially the younger children. Celia gives the children piano lessons and serves them cookies and punch afterward. And on Easter, she colors eggs and leaves them on the lawn. The children, in turn, invite her to their birthday parties, and I hear she enjoys the clowns and the magicians and the puppet shows as much as the children do themselves."

He shuffled the envelopes and magazines in his hands and said, "Now, by contrast, Gladys Desiree is considered a loony. And mean. Inside she's not so mean, but she tosses that toucan beak of hers high in the air and walks off carrying her grudges under her wing the way other women carry their purses. You can see it in her behavior with me. But whatever she's got against Celia Vortek regarding a so-called stolen lover is something fierce. Gladys' grudge against Celia not only never simmered down through all these years, it occupies most of her time. She's busy with it all day long."

"So you don't know anything about this mutual lover?"

"That was all before my time."

"Do you know anything about a scandal?" I asked.

"Scandal? No." He looked shocked and deprived. "I don't know anything about any scandal. Listen, Mrs. Stoakes, if there was a scandal, I would have known about it. The neighbors would have told me."

"Maybe that, too, happened before your time. It really is quite ironic that after everything—I mean the stolen lover and bitter feelings—both women ended up spinsters. I was counting on you for details."

“For a novel maybe,” said the mailman. “Celia’s the only person who can tell you the whole story. You’re a writer; maybe you can unlock her treasure trunk.”

He sounded like Annie with that treasure trunk business. I watched him continue on down the street on his route, and I returned to my work and my anger with Haiden. I sat there in an acid cauldron and struggled to concentrate. I looked at my wristwatch. It was almost three o’clock, Friday afternoon. I found myself staring across the street at Celia’s house. Celia emerged like a wooden figurine from inside a Swiss clock, striking the hour. She pushed open her screen door and stepped out onto her porch. She stood there holding her basket of candies, squinting in the direction of the school, waiting. On my side of the street at that moment, Gladys’ screen door flew open and she in her large straw hat sallied forth—a hat conspicuous enough to catch Celia’s attention. She proceeded to meander up and down through her garden, ever believing the sight of her kept Celia’s conscience agitated. But Celia never looked in Gladys’ direction, only toward her oncoming business.

From down the street, the children ran toward Celia, like a bevy of little birds chirping and fluttering their wings. Quickly Celia poised her hand inside her basket. Nearer and nearer, noisier and noisier, and all at once she jumped as she scattered a fistful of candy high over their heads to rain down on them. Then another fistful and another. She called out happily to them as they scampered over her lawn for the shiny colored sweets. She was almost at one with them in their noise and laughter, with their little bodies jumping and her body jumping, with their little arms reaching and fingers stretching toward hers and hers tossing out the treasure to them. Suddenly she stopped, turned her basket upside down so they could see, and they waved

goodbye and were gone. She stood there yet, looking after them, bereft.

I waved and called over from my porch. “Are you in the mood for a visitor?”

Celia squinted at me as if trying to make sense of my words and suddenly she nodded her head vigorously.

I walked across the empty street of this quiet neighborhood.

34

“You are nice,” Celia said, smiling, as she watched my approach.

I walked over the stepping stones between the tall wild grasses and weeds, up the wooden steps to her porch. What was the name of that fairytale where the princess slept for a hundred years and the briar bushes surrounding the castle walls grew so thick that the prince had difficulty cutting his way through to rescue the princess? “Sleeping Beauty,” — yes, that was it. Yet, the porch managed to house some furniture: two folding chairs. I had never seen any visitors enter or leave her house, but by the presence of the two chairs there must have been some activity out there.

The door stood open. Celia beckoned me to follow her through a dark entry smelling of mothballs and into a large living room where heavy draperies were open but still the room was too dark and warm. She turned on the small table lamp by the window, the same lamp I saw on that first terrible Saturday shining like a lighthouse in a rainstorm. It did not provide much light now, only to the small area

where the beam fell. “Would you like a dish of cottage cheese and peaches?” she asked through the warm air.

“Yes.”

Her eyes lit up. “I’ll be right back.”

She walked out of the living room, this little round woman in her man’s haircut, her flowered smock and her sensible shoes with her stockings rolled down, and I stood very still waiting for the pupils of my eyes to expand and adjust to the semi-darkness. What was that on the walls? Comic strips from newspapers! On all four walls, as high as a short person like Celia could reach to mount them and read them. Some were very old, bubbling and torn; some quite fresh. Otherwise there was no color in the room. There was the brown piano, and the upholstered furniture in dark colors. The interior of this room departed long ago from any considerations of fashion. Two short sofas faced each other in the middle of the room. An oak coffee table spread out between the two small sofas. I sat down on one, fell into its ancient and permanent concavity, and thought such a room invited a kind of hibernation, like submerging into a pair of old slippers and a flannel robe, a room to nurse a cold. It was a room to sit in all alone for years and ponder a missed life. In its semi-darkness and stillness, the very difference between night and day, past and present, disappeared. Time stopped and a thickness claimed the warm air. Suddenly I heard a sound. A small close shuffling sound. I looked around and nearly jumped out of my skin. Another person was sitting in the room. There, against the wall, on the edge of a very long dark sofa, her eyes black and shining like hard-crusted beetles. Her hands clasped together in her lap. A child? No. The smallest adult I had ever seen.

“Here we are now.” Celia announced walking in, carrying a wooden bed tray. I tore my eyes away from the tiny person. On the tray were two blue china bowls, sky blue, the kind of bowls purchased in the sundry section of a grocery store, thick and inexpensive, and now holding snowy mounds of cottage cheese crowned with crescents of peaches. And plunging straight down through the center of each mound, a soup spoon. “In the wintertime, I use peaches from a can.”

“Oh.”

She placed the tray on the oak coffee table between us. Then, she sat down on the sofa opposite me and proceeded to lift one of the blue china bowls very slowly, almost reverentially. She offered it to me, and in the same manner lifted the other for herself. It was then that I realized she did most things slowly: talking, smiling, and now she would eat slowly.

“This lady on the sofa is my mother,” Celia said as she lifted her spoon filled with cottage cheese. “My mother cannot speak. She also cannot read or write—anymore. She walks very little. My mother spends her days like that, sitting.” Celia passed the spoon into her mouth and then out and began chewing.

I moved my eyes toward the little mother. She was the size of a seven-year-old child. Old people, I knew, shrank with the years. This lady must have been over a hundred years old. Was she also blind? Her eyes seemed all pupils, black and shining, and the eyelids stretched so wide—she was not looking at anything. If I were asked to describe her expression I would say it was one of shock, perpetual shock.

Celia’s spoon slowly wavered back and forth over her bowl like a toy crane over a sand castle. It came down and she made a second indentation into the white mound and scooped up another spoonful.

Then I, too, began eating. Our spoons clicked against the sky blue china bowls, making the only sounds in the otherwise silent room. Click, click, click, click.

"You and your mother look very much alike," I said.

Both women wore men's haircuts, shaved in the back and along the sides. Both wore flowered housedresses. Both wore their stockings rolled down like socks, but while Celia's stopped at the rim of sturdy shoes, her mother's stopped at the rim of high-topped soft slippers, like booties. The mother appeared as a miniature of the daughter.

I was not good at small talk and, apparently, neither was Celia. Halfway through the repast, she looked up. "Do you have any children, Mrs. Stoakes?"

"Call me Rhea. No, no children. It did not happen."

She stared at me. Then she said, "My mother is like a child. I take care of her." We continued to eat our cottage cheese and peaches. The little mother sat upright and seemed to be listening to the spoons clicking against the sides of our bowls.

When we finished, Celia began to tell me her duties toward her mother. "I feed her. I bathe her. I used to brush her teeth when she still had teeth—that part was very hard."

"Yes, I can imagine."

"I dress her each morning, and undress her each night. During the day, I let my mother nap in her housedress."

The little housedress was slightly wrinkled.

"She understands everything."

Celia went on to tell me that Monday was marketing day and Tuesday was gardening day; then she moved on to Wednesday,

Thursday, “and on Friday there are the children after school. I give them candy.” After that, Celia stopped speaking. It was my turn.

I told her that I also marketed on Mondays, but sometimes on Thursdays, too. I told her that I had worked as a secretary for many years, more years than I originally planned, but that was because my husband did not work. “However, finally one day I just up and quit.” My voice dropped; my mouth quivered. “We bought this house and rent out rooms so that we can have an income. Now I attend college and plan to be a writer. Well, I already am a writer but not yet a published one. I am writing a mystery.”

“Oh. My father used to read mystery stories all the time. Now I read them to my mother. I see you writing every morning out on the porch and most afternoons, too. In the evenings, you read out there. You like living on the porch more than in the house.”

“True.”

“Those other people do not sit on the porch. They used to sit on the porch.”

“Other people? Oh, our tenants, you mean. Well, they used to talk with my husband out there. But he has changed, so they have changed. And I have changed.”

“People change.”

“They see that I write out there, so they don’t disturb me.”

“Miss Vortek, the mailman told me you were born in this house.”

“Yes.”

“When you were my age,” I was careful to ask my question kindly, “what was your life like?”

“It wasn’t always like it is now.”

"No, not always." She had stopped speaking. Celia did not talk in long sentences.

"Are you sorry that you did not marry?" I blurted out.

Celia's mother started to throw up.

"Excuse me a moment, Rhea." Celia took her mother into another room.

I heard the water running. Then a shuffling noise. In a little while, Celia came back into the living room alone. "My mother is napping now." She sat down heavily.

"I was asking you if you were sorry that you did not marry."

"Oh, I married."

"What!"

"Yes." She stood up again and walked over to the mantel where two framed photographs stood close together. Even from where I sat, I could see that one photograph held Celia's likeness in two old people—very dignified. "These are my parents." She pointed to it without touching it. The other photograph she lifted, wiped any possible dust from the glass frame, and brought it to me and placed it carefully on my lap. A young man smiled sheepishly out at me.

"Nice looking," I said.

"Yes," she nodded thoughtfully. "And he was a nice person." She sat down. I expected her to continue. She did not.

Clearing my throat, "How long ago did he die?" Why did I assume that?

"Oh, he did not die." How thoughtless of me. Perhaps they divorced.

Celia began rocking back and forth.

Quickly, I changed the subject. "I can't help noticing the comic strips on the walls."

"Yes."

She rocked.

She made me nervous but I persevered. "You certainly have a good time tossing candy to the children."

She brightened. "My husband used to do that."

"Your husband had quite a sense of fun."

Her eyes lighted up. She repeated my sentence slowly, "Your husband had quite a sense of fun." But then she stopped.

Such a faltering conversation! Perhaps I had offended her and she no longer wanted my company. I started to get up.

"He was younger than I was."

I caught my breath. "Gladys Desiree says you stole him from her."

"She did not know him." Then she reached toward me. Apparently she wanted the photograph. I handed it to her and she took it to her breast; then she stood up and returned it to the mantel, setting it down very carefully. She turned around and walked slowly back. She sat down and said, "Gladys is talking about my second husband."

"Your <u>second</u> husband?"

With her mouth closed, she started to make a sound that seemed to come from deep in her belly and grew louder and louder until she opened her mouth and out it rushed as a huge bellowing groan. I think it was a groan, and the groan rang out to the newspapered walls and bounced off and seemed to re-enter her mouth and she closed her lips. Silence again pervaded.

My God! I froze.

Suddenly Celia came forward with a question of her own: "Have you been married long, Rhea?"

“Fifteen years.”

“Fifteen years is a long time to be happy.”

“Right now I am having some difficulty,” I said. Why not confide in her? She has been married twice. So I told her, “My husband is having a mid-life crisis.” The hatred rushed up; I could hear it in my voice.

“A mid-life crisis?”

“He is behaving very badly.”

“Oh.”

“Haiden is being unfaithful to me.”

“Oh.”

“And I am trying to decide how to behave in return.”

“Are you very unhappy?”

“I am very angry.” I had difficulty breathing and clasped my chest.

She said nothing.

I went on. “My anger is consuming me.”

She moved over to my sofa and sat down beside me. Taking both of my hands in hers, she gripped them tightly, but uttered not a word. She was offering me sympathy I supposed. She stared down at our hands together, and we sat like that for some time. Was she praying for me? I did not understand. Suddenly she leaned forward as if to say something very private, very personal. So I leaned forward, as well, to listen closely. “Please, please,” her short fingers, now warm, even hot, pushed into my palms, her eyes looking positively maternal, as she whispered, “Stay good.”

“What!” I jumped up, out of my seat. She frightened me. I glanced at my wristwatch. “We, Haiden and I, have a cocktail hour every Friday afternoon at five-thirty. I must be getting back.”

“Please come again.”

“Thank you for the cottage cheese and peaches.” Smiling quickly, I flew to the door. I fumbled with the knob—my heart was racing.

toI ran into the street. A car screeched to a stop. I reached the safety of my porch.

35

In an attempt to calm down from that visit with Celia, I began prepare my dinner, pulling out eggs from the refrigerator, five or six, as many as I could carry in two hands. I didn’t know what I was doing. What a thing to say to me! “Stay good!” Was she trying to read my mind? The doorbell rang. I set down the eggs and walked into the living room. Johnnie Banghart stood outside, blocking out most of the light as he smiled in, dimples on the attack. A lock of peroxided hair fell over one eyebrow, or had he placed it there purposely? A thin gold chain hung around his tanned neck and down beneath his shirt on his well-developed tanned chest. “I have a favor to ask, Rhea. May I come in?”

“You may come in.” I pushed open the door.

“Am I disturbing—”

“We’re alone.”

He walked inside and looked around.

“Why don’t you come with me into the kitchen? I was just going to scramble some eggs. Would you like—”

“Nope.”

“Would you like some wine?”

“Yes.”

He followed me and his cologne marched ahead of him. The presence of this man in my house threw me off balance. I recognized all along that my attraction to him was nothing more than a backlash to Haiden, a desperation, but nonetheless I worked hard to appear in control.

Handing him the wine opener and a fresh bottle of merlot, “Now, Johnnie Banghart, what is this favor?” He did the honors, and as I sipped the dark red nectar and felt its ethereal heat rushing through my veins, I found my thoughts again travelling all over him.

“Rhea, I want you to pose as my new girlfriend in front of my partner Mike Trapperman. He’s putting on a big wedding anniversary celebration for himself and his Sylvia in the banquet room. You’re a more respectable age than Jennifer, presumably more sensible and stable. If he thinks I’m getting serious with a serious person and still want to sell off my partnership, he may give in. What do you say? Just for an evening. It’s a long shot, but it’s worth a try.”

I nodded, yes.

“You’ll do it? I love you.” He picked me up and swung me in the air, and I felt sensible and stable—old and dull; but I sorely needed to feel young and exciting. “If that’ll be all right with you and your husband.”

“It’ll be just fine.”

The following Saturday night just as I slipped into my best black lace evening dress, Haiden entered the room. He looked at the wall and said, “I’ll be going out myself.”

“Do whatever you like. But out of curiosity, where are you going?”

“To a Bible study group.”

On a Saturday night? Almost believable. Haiden was wearing new clothes. It dawned on me that he had purchased a new wardrobe for his expanding torso.

As he retreated through the doorframe, I barely recognized his bulk.

He drove off—*thud*—and silence swelled out into the air like smoke. Unable to zip up my dress, I thought of changing into another outfit when suddenly the doorbell rang.

"Good evening, Rhea." I fell back slightly at the sight of Johnnie in his tuxedo. He was indeed very handsome. "Is Haiden here?"

"No. Would you zip me up, please." I said too fast.

He laughed, stepped inside the door, and the touch of his hands on my back caused me to jump. "Cold fingers?"

The Trapperman's parking lot was packed. We walked through the main entrance of the restaurant and into the Saturday night noise coming from people with open shirts and sandals. We proceeded on through to the banquet room. In here the men wore dark suits, and the women heightened the festivity with their shimmering cocktail frocks and jeweled purses. I removed my wedding band with a great sense of daring and justification. A white-haired man wearing a black moustache, the only other man in the room in a tuxedo beside Johnnie and the only man wearing a boutonniere in his lapel, approached us. Johnnie called out, "Uncle Mike! Congratulations. Where's the bride?"

"Good evening, Johnnie, my man. Sylvia's decked out in a solid gold dress. You can't miss her; she lights up." His eyes were on me. "Who is this lovely young woman?"

“Meet Rhea Stoakes, my new next-door neighbor. She’s a writer,” and he pulled me close.

“Aha! Very nice, Johnnie. How do you do, Ms. Stoakes.” He extended his massive hand. He was a thick man with big hands. Suddenly an equally thick woman shining like a sun goddess in her gold lame dress joined us. She reached out to Jonnie with a wrist decorated in two white orchids. Her face was flush and damp, her dark eyes flashed. She puckered up, “Johnnie. Give the bride a kiss.”

She smeared lipstick on his cheek, and he reached into the crook of her neck where he planted a kiss that produced a big bubbly noise. She doubled up with laughter, then pulled away. “Now, the other side.” So he came at her again and she doubled up again. “Now, your turn.” She grabbed Johnnie’s face between two spread palms and planted a big smack of a kiss on his lips. Pulling a handkerchief out of her golden sleeve, she wiped his cheek.

“Sylvia, this is a lady friend of Johnnie’s; she lives next door. She’s a writer. Meet Ms. Rhea Stoakes.”

“How do you dooh!” said Mrs. Trapperman. Her voice travelled up the scale and an eyebrow synchronized with it.

I asked, “May I ask exactly how many years of marriage you are celebrating, Mrs. Trapperman?”

“Forty years, with four daughters in six years,” said Sylvia Trapperman, leaning against Mike. “Our girls are doing very well; they are not silly girls. Over there in the red dress is Number One daughter; she’s going to be a medical doctor. Number Two, beside the cake, is our future lawyer. Number Three, in the corner, soon a school teacher. And Number Four, our baby, there in yellow, she’s working on her degree in Accounting.

“Your daughters are very ambitious.”

“That makes them expensive,” said Mike. “Do you realize what college for four girls means to my pocket, even with scholarships?”

“You must be a good provider for them. You live your life for their welfare. But as for myself, I clearly don’t want responsibilities. I want to play.” He wrapped his arm around me and drew me close.

The bandleader announced over the loudspeaker that dinner was ready. Everyone found a seat around the horseshoe table. The people pulled in their chairs, admired the floral centerpieces, and looked up to Mike who now stood in front of the microphone tapping a spoon against his glass for everyone to quiet down. “Ladies and gentlemen.” He cleared his throat. “I married this beautiful woman beside me for her good cooking, and then I went ahead, not thinking, and opened a restaurant, Sylvia never again cooked for me. I cook for her.” He slapped his forehead. “Dummy.” Everyone laughed. “Well, she cooks a little for me, but only on my nights off.” The four daughters sat nearby at the head table with full smiling faces and thick torsos—just like mamma.

Waiters in white jackets charged into the room like ants racing out of a hole, balancing enormous platters over their heads filled beyond capacity with roast chicken, brisket, kishka, and mounds of varnishkas. Extra platters for second helpings were shoved into every available space between the carafes of wine, baskets of hot rolls, floral arrangements, and small dishes of nuts and mints. At once I realized that almost everyone in the room was built like Mr. and Mrs. Trapperman. This was an eating crowd.

This was also a very married crowd. With the exception of the four daughters, wedding rings circled the chubby fourth fingers of almost every female hand. I was looking at Noah's Ark. The good looking people paired up; as did those with hangdog countenances;

small-shouldered shrinking men cuddled their now larger-than themselves wives; All the women were blondies. All the men were rosy cheeked; everyone not dancing was talking and hugging and slapping backs. The few single adults at the anniversary party suffered glances of pity and voices filled with condolences.

The small band of musicians played vigorously. People jumped up periodically to dance inside the horseshoe. The ample women on their delicate ankles moved with amazing lightness of foot, and their equally well-fed husbands held them as closely as possible; the poundage and years slipped away onto the thunderous wooden floor. Short couples shuffled their way around tall couples who periodically expanded their space with a sudden ballroom flourish. Others danced in place.

We made our way to the dance floor. Yes, I was attracted to this man, but only because Haiden had rejected me. Remember that, Rhea. Even so, when Johnnie's arms drew me in close and we danced without talking and his body, warm and cologned, engulfed me, for he was an intimate dancer, I was feeling altogether alive and desirable. Haiden had never made me feel desirable. Not Haiden, with his constant call for improvement, for moral and physical self-improvement: "You could be just a little slimmer, Rhea." "Stand up straight, Rhea." "Hold in your stomach, Rhea." "Rhea, do you really need that second helping?" "I suggest you change beauticians."

Johnnie whispered, "Your hair smells like mangoes."

The musicians trumpeted some fanfare and the bandleader asked everyone to sit down for the cutting of the anniversary cake. Mike and Sylvia were still circulating, kissing everyone on the cheek and receiving congratulations. Mike raised one finger to the bandleader and mouthed the word, "Wait!" as he and Sylvia

approached us and I composed myself. “You two looked very nice out here on the dance floor,” said Mike.

I surprised them and myself when I said, “As Johnnie’s next-door neighbor and friend, I’d like to invite you to my house for dinner. Can you come next Saturday night?”

Johnnie was visibly shocked.

The Trappermans attached significance to this invitation. Mike said, “Of course we can come. But Monday is better for us; it’s our lightest night in the restaurant business.”

Later, as we said goodnight, Sylvia Trapperman pulled me to the side for a short tete-a-tete, as women do. “You know Johnnie has been married before?”

“Yes.”

“Three times.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know about his first wife, Matilda?”

“Yes.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “Good.”

We drove home listening to music on the radio. “You were very nice to invite Mike and Sylvia for dinner.” Johnnie pulled into his garage, turned off the headlights, and leaned toward me. “Would you like to come in for awhile?”

“Aren’t you forgetting Jennifer, your twenty-three-year-old?”

“Yes.”

He began to nuzzle my hair. He brushed his lips along my neck and his hand began to move over me. My body quickened. Blood warmed and flowed and erogenous zones, new to me or forgotten,

swelled in readiness. Haiden had never made me feel this way. Haiden had designated two nights a week for sex, Tuesdays and Saturdays. That is, during the years when we engaged in sex. He designated those nights to coincide with the days of the week when he took his iron pills. But when I announced my retirement and left him stranded with only the rental income—it was a Tuesday— that night he claimed a headache from a difficult day. On the following Saturday night, he merely went to sleep without any explanation whatsoever. I realized he was punishing me because I had not consulted with him about retiring. If I wanted sex, I would have to return to my office work. And so, he never approached me again. That was all right with me; sex was a nuisance I had endured as one of my wifely duties. Although, for years, I had blamed myself for lacking the true erotic impulse. Yet here, now, in the car, with Johnny, a flow of hormones coursed throughout my body, heavily drugging me. I closed my eyes and threw my head back feeling beautiful and voluptuous. Johnnie made me feel so desirable that his only purpose in life seemed to bring me pleasure. But suddenly, he moved too fast and I was not prepared. The moment broke. I felt like a novice, an innocent, and questioned what in the world I was doing. My eyes flew open and I watched the two of us intertwined and gyrating and felt his hands finding their way where no man had ever been, and I saw that this was sex without the component of attachment. And the next moment, I gently shoved Johnnie away.

“Of course!” he said, pushing back his peroxided front locks. “I’m a naughty boy, as Gladys says.”

He escorted me home, but oh, inconstant Rhea, how I regretted pushing him away. All that night, it was impossible to calm down sufficiently. The hammock proved too hard, too soft, too narrow, and I

glanced over at Johnnie's porch repeatedly. I tossed and turned until daybreak. Sleep finally came for a few hours.

In the morning my eyes flapped open to the rackety noise of Haiden pulling our trash barrels from the side of the house to the street curb. I waited until I heard the garage door open—*thud*—and he drove off. I sat up, angry, exhausted, and pushed myself to a standing position. I marched into a gloomy kitchen. There, momentarily dazed from lack of sleep, I stared at a single large droplet of water clinging probably since last night to the mouth of the chrome faucet and I stared at the dust hanging motionless in the cylinder of a sunbeam. In a trance-like state, I shuffled over to the refrigerator, and swung open the door: yogurt, blueberries, muffins, milk. Everything seemed so heavy. I brewed a cup of coffee and watched the dark stream fall into the Pyrex. Again I saw Haiden handing Katie Shiner a small velvet box— he was having sex with her regularly.

Suddenly, as though I had already ingested an entire pot of strong coffee, I was too nervous inside my own skin. The porch would calm me. So, with exaggerated deliberateness, one step at a time, I carefully carried my breakfast toward the front door. I flung open the screen, stepped out onto the porch, yes, I feel better out here. I spotted the morning newspaper on the driveway— It would focus my attention and calm me—I retrieved it.

I settled down with a sigh. But the coffee was too weak; the food proved tasteless; and the newspaper print blurred in front of my eyes. Chew, chew, chew, chew. My foot tapped double time to some imaginary tune that I did not hear. I glanced up across the street to Celia's porch. I saw only the sun on her hands; the rest of her sat in

the shadows. Why did you say that, Celia? Why did you say, “Stay good”?

With breakfast finally finished, I already knew the futility of writing this day. I was angry; I could not think. I only wanted to feel my anger. So with a vengeance I dug weeds out of the back garden and then took a pitchfork to a small tree that I never liked. Haiden had been away all night, fornicating. Who cared? I pruned bushes through the noon hour, and then, still feeling immense anger, flung aside my gloves. I washed my hands, prepared a tray—two cereal bowls filled with cottage cheese and peaches, and marched across the street. Celia’s doorknocker fell with a sound like the ramming of a castle.

The door opened. Celia looked out at me from the doorframe, stared down at my tray, and said, “You are a very friendly person, Rhea.” She allowed me to lead the way. I entered the living room where again the semi-darkness temporarily blinded me, where the comic strip pages of newspaper on the wall slowly came into sight, and at one end of the long sofa against the wall sat the tiny mother staring straight ahead.

Celia sat down on one of the two short sofas facing each other; I sat down opposite. She planted her feet together and took up one bowl of cottage cheese and peaches; I took up the other. We began eating. The spoons clicked against the interior walls of the bowls. We emptied the contents. I waited. I believed if I held my silence, eventually she would feel compelled to talk.

She placed her empty bowl on the tray. She sat back.

I waited!

She leaned forward and shoved her bowl to the center of the tray.

I waited!

She crossed her legs at the ankles and folded her hands together.

I waited!

She cleared her throat.

Now!

“I was a young girl when I fell in love with him,” she said.

“Your first husband?”

“Yes.”

Her mother suddenly started crying. Celia stood up. “I will be right back.” She led her mother out of the room. Two old women, one short, the other diminutive, both in flowered housedresses and men’s haircuts, the taller one taking care of the smaller one, and a few minutes later the taller one returned. “I am very sorry. My mother is resting quietly now. I put her down for a nap.”

She again took her place on the sofa opposite me.

“You were speaking of your first husband,” I said.

Again she crossed her feet at the ankles and folded her hands together. Her speech came slowly, haltingly, in simple word choices and sentence constructions. I wanted her to reveal in a flash what she meant by her expression, “Stay good,” but it was not to be like that. So eventually, I relaxed, and settled back to listen. As she proceeded, I discovered great gaps in her narration, and long silences. This inability to articulate details I attributed to strong emotions and inhibitions as well as to a natural reticence, so I found myself compelled to listen through my writer’s ear and fill in the unspoken parts with my writer’s voice. Sometimes in the beginning parts of her

tale, I was confused until I straightened out the husbands—that is, when she was talking about husband number one or husband number two. But slowly she proceeded and slowly I unraveled her story. I told everything to Annabelle.

Part IV

36

a.

Celia never liked her second husband. The marriage had been arranged because Celia was thirty-seven years old. Arranged? No, forced. Her parents, getting on in years themselves, told her she could no longer live in their home. ‘You’re getting too old, Celia. It’s a disgrace. You must grow up and take your place in society.’ Or rather, it was her mother who actually said this. The father stood by, as was the custom in such matters. At least in that household.

“And you’re writing all of this down, aren’t you, Rhea?” said Annabelle.

“Yes, I am.”

“Writing it exactly the way she’s telling her story.”

“Not exactly,” I explained because she is full of silences, I have to ask her a great many questions. She was one of those singular children born to old parents and turned out old-fashioned herself, which meant she was quiet and different from her age group. Her parents could just as well have been her grandparents. She received

the effects of not merely one generation of separation between herself and her peers but also the complications that sometime go with being an only child.

I surmised that in elementary school, Celia Vortek was never one of the gang. At the school graduation party, she appeared in a burgundy velvet dress trimmed with a lace collar, while the other little girls wore designer pants and shirts. She wore two long braids down to her waist when other little girls wore short curls. By the time she wore short curls, in high school, the other girls rinsed their long hair every night in vinegar to make it fashionably straight. Celia was instructed in the art of being very quiet and obedient. She was told to stand up straight, smile frequently, neither swing her legs under the dining table, nor become too excited when she spoke. Because of her sweetness, from time to time she acquired a few girlfriends, but they drifted in and out of her life like the tide—while boys overlooked her altogether. She relied on her home and her parents for her share of attachments and affection in this world.

Celia was born by way of Cesarean delivery, gently lifted out and escaping trauma; she was a small baby. The nurse those first two weeks in the Vortek home was amazed that the baby never awoke during the middle of the night, especially since a small baby has a small stomach that can hold only small amounts of food and requires frequent nourishment. ‘The baby does not cry,’ said the nurse. ‘I’ve never seen such a thing. She is so good.’

As she grew, Celia continued to be amenable in every way possible. She ate all the food presented to her at table, dressed in the clothes purchased for her, and tended to her schoolwork and her chores without complaint. Her bedroom of hulking almost black wooden furniture—dark for a child but a sensible buy to last a long

time—was always tidy. The white chenille bedspread was for show only, not for lying on, and the matching milk glass bric-a-brac was the mother's taste. The room was devoid of any personal items reflecting a child's delights. For her toys and books, even for the choice of her radio programs, Celia showed no resistance or opinions to her parents' selections. So they—without any contrary signals— guided their daughter 'What a perfect child,' said Mrs. Vortek to Mr. Vortek. 'So well behaved. She is a blessing.'

When her parents requested that Celia take piano lessons, "for refinement, dear, to provide you with some distinction," the child asked for ballet lessons. But her parents suggested that ballet was not for her with her thick sturdy legs, and she dutifully complied. She practiced piano diligently every afternoon for years. Her piano teacher arrived every Saturday mornings, but eventually sighed, "Celia progresses slowly.'"

The results from all the musical training became one of her parents' great disappointments in her. As the years passed, Celia was unable to distinguish herself in any way, neither in any of the arts nor academically. Yet, perhaps a peculiar case could be argued in her behalf that she set herself apart by her very lack of distinction.

Celia was not a plain looking young girl. She was, in fact, pretty —with little brown eyes, a tiny nose, round cheeks, and rosebud lips. But her figure was plump, and her voice almost too soft to be heard. In school, she always selected a desk in the back row of the classroom and the teacher rarely called upon her. She went to the movies on Saturday afternoons with other girlfriends of the moment, but she always seemed to be third in the group, or fifth, the one who walked behind while the others paired off in front of her and talked

energetically to each other. And when she said goodbye to them, they looked at her as if they suddenly remembered she was there.

Her taste in the arts was puzzling. Of music, “It is all very nice to me,” she would say. Of the movies, she watched almost any kind, even those she did not understand. The few books she read left her just as she was before reading them, without comment. She graduated from high school and went to work for the Five and Dime Store behind the counter. There she remained indefinitely, without complaint.

Celia lived comfortably in her parents’ early nineteen hundred’s clapboard house with its deep shaded front porch, and she spent countless hours sitting out on the porch in the wicker hammock, rocking in the afternoon breeze. There she listened to her father read aloud from the works of mystery writers he loved so well. The chains of the hammock squeaked when she moved, so during recitations she sat very still. Her mother joined the two of them on the porch carrying a tray with cookies and a pitcher of lemonade, also settling down to listen to Mr. Vortek who was a very effective reader. At the proper moments, with exceedingly fine elocution, he slowed the pace, or hastened it, pitched his voice deep for the men’s lines or high for the female lines—and Mrs. Vortek would burst out, “Better than a radio program, Stanley.” The entire family spent many of their weekend afternoons on the front porch, so occupied. And after Mr. Vortek retired, the recitations occurred daily.

There was The Case of The Poisoned Rose Garden; The Disappearance in Blue Lagoon; The Landlord’s Private Chamber; The House at Land’s End; The Bludgeoning of Dr. Orth; and on and on and on—bookcases filled with them; and after his retirement Mr. Vortek began rereading his entire collection aloud because he had all those

long days now free to do so. And he liked to discuss each case out there on the porch with his wife. Celia listened contentedly, sitting under their protection.

Mrs. Vortek took her turn at intervals, and to this Celia was equally content. Lois Vortek liked to gaze into her husband's eyes and share the telling of their courtship days. She always started in the same way, running her hand over her smooth hairdo tucked into a bun at the back of her neck and adjusting her pince-nez. 'I held a sales position with Kismet Stationers. It was a lovely store. We sold not only stationery but small gift items, specializing in milk glass bric-a-brac, with twenty percent off for employees. Everyday I dressed in a dark business frock with a white collar and I arranged a fresh lace handkerchief in my lapel pocket, as befits a proper young lady holding a responsible sales position. After all, I was dealing with the public. And on the outside of my pocket I pinned a small black badge bearing my name; the lettering etched in white. I took my position very seriously. In time, through application and diligence, and the fact that I never arrived late, I advanced to a higher position—that of assistant manager. My badge now carried my name and my new title. A small increase in salary came along with it. You can just imagine how proud I was. The holidays, without question, were my favorite times. All the extra activity and the decorations; it was terribly exciting. I came in earlier than usual and left later because, of course, we were processing a greater amount of merchandise. My goodness, how the number of customers jumped up. There was always such a hurly-burly of people in the store and I was so busy that only during the holidays did I not worry about getting older and being all alone. But between holidays, well, that was a different matter; I did worry." Her voice would lower for just an instant. 'Then one day, Mr. Stanley Vortek

walked right into Kismet Stationers.' Lois looked over at her husband, her eyes soft and glistening, and at the same time she placed her hand gently over Stanley's, saying, 'You was so polite. You were my knight in shining armor.' And with that, the telling of her courtship hung suspended for a moment, and then ended.

Annabelle interjected, "They were lucky to have found each other: Mr. and Mrs. Right. Too bad that Celia didn't have such luck. Nor you, Rhea."

"Then you finally agree that my husband is having an affair?" I said.

"No, Rhea. But he is going through something—I still think it's his Midlife Crisis."

"Did Fred go through it?"

"Nothing fazes Fred. He's very happy with his pet shop and me. With the status quo."

I continued with Celia's tale. "Mr. Vortek seemingly never experienced a Midlife Crisis. Early in his life when he was deciding upon a career, his uncle said, 'Stanley, my boy, most people in the world, sooner or later, will be wearing glasses. People just can't see well forever; they struggle along until it catches up with them. Listen to me, my boy, you should become an optician and you'll never be out of work.' Stanley took his uncle's advice, and thirty years later he was still grinding lenses.

"Mr. Vortek made a modest living, but he was frugal. These were large houses and considered a good investment. Mr. Vortek's uncle was also right in that many people required better vision. Stanley himself was very nearsighted; in fact a person could say his whole world fell inside a nearsighted circumference: he was either grinding lenses or reading mystery books. Every weekday, he left

home carrying his bagged lunch, his thermos of coffee, and a mystery novel. And at the noon hour, he took his place with the other opticians at a redwood picnic table near the water cooler. He spread out his sandwich, his cup of fruit cocktail, poured coffee from his thermos, and socialized for a time. But as soon as he tossed out the sandwich wrapper and rinsed out his fruit cup container and thermos, he removed himself to a corner of the table and settled back into his favorite pastime. He was able to block out the voices of the others and submerge himself into the engrossing world of his book. Everyday at the noon hour, when he opened his book, the others teased him a little, saying loud enough so that he could hear, 'Stanley also reads at breakfast, dinner, and on the john.'

"He lived alone and it was his habit to read mystery novels to fill his free time. But as he neared the outer rim of his middle years, he felt a flutter of panic and realized that he did not want to die alone in his house. He had lived a small life, not being endowed with an appetite for social gatherings or travel or even collecting a few good paintings; but now, as the years waned, he felt a slight desperation to expand his life. So one day when he entered a nice stationery store to purchase a birthday card for his employer, he noticed the quiet lady with the smooth hairdo, the bun at the back of her neck, and the pince-nez eyeglasses. She wore a lace handkerchief in her lapel pocket and a badge pinned to the outside. Her first name was Lois; and his heart stirred.

"Their courtship began, and at the proper moment he proposed marriage in the singular way of presenting his bank book to Lois and then expressed a desire to share his money and his home so that the two of them could enjoy their middle years together and, if careful, their old age. He gave her a strand of pearls and a matching set of

earrings as an engagement present, and Lois offered her own small bankbook in return; and they were married.

“A child was a complete surprise. Almost embarrassing, some thought. Their friends were as old as they were and still single and certain subjects were never discussed. For the baby shower, friends purchased their gifts with heavy dependence on the advice of young salespeople. It was a small gathering. People sat quietly. A heavily frosted lemon cake along with tea and punch were served. After Celia was born, most of their friends had little in common with new parents and drifted out of their lives. So they were left largely to themselves. Stanley converted one room into a nursery.”

Annabelle interrupted. “The Vorteks had a child. That was more than Fred and I managed. Or you and Haiden.”

What could I say to that! She was right. Annabelle and Fred was sexual, loved each other, and still they did not bring forth a child. Haiden and I were not sexual with each other and did not love each other, so if we had brought forth a child I would have said that Mother Nature was perverse, or at the least a screwball. But Celia Vortek’s parents were matched in their own way, and they brought forth their only child and thought they were doing the best they could for her. Just as my parents thought when they alighted on Haiden for me.

“Lois dedicated herself to raising little Celia. She felt an immense responsibility to guide her child properly. She taught Celia numbers and letters, called out the names of insects and flowers, showed the child how to set a table, keep her toys orderly, her dress clean, how to chew with her mouth closed, sit like a lady with her feet together and her hands in her lap, and while Mrs. Vortek was cooking or cleaning, Celia obediently played with her doll. When Celia became

a teenager, not growing tall but now surprisingly amply endowed, her mother was inarticulate in female matters and fumbled through the young girl's education, leaving Celia in confusion.

"Eventually Stanley Vortek moved into his retirement. After breakfast, he brought his second cup of coffee into the living room where he sat down in his chair by the fireplace and read his newspaper. When he finished, he gardened until lunch. After lunch he tucked his mystery novel under his arm and proceeded out to the front porch, at which time the rest of the family gathered around him to hear him deliver a dramatic reading.

"As for a more cosmopolitan extension to their lives, the family depended on their car. During the hours Celia was in school, Mr. Vortek drove his wife to the market or to the dry cleaners. Lois did not drive. 'I won't be long, Stanley,' Lois would say as her husband remained at the wheel and opened his book. But the three of them took Sunday drives— Mr. Vortek called them Airings— and on those occasions he treated the family to coffee shop lunches, a movie, and afterward ice cream cones with which the three of them promenaded looking in at the store windows.

"Mr. Vortek believed that raising a daughter was a woman's responsibility. He said, 'A mother must be firm; a mother naturally knows what is best for a daughter.'

"Mrs. Vortek began to worry about Celia's future. 'We have always been sensible and practical people. It is time to be even more sensible and practical about Celia. Stanley, you and I have only so much money to carry us comfortably through our old age. There is enough for two, but not three. Celia must marry. She must take her place in the world. And that is as it should be. But instead, she sits at

home and leads a life altogether too quiet and solitary. Frankly, I am worried that if she does not meet some nice young man soon—‘

“Mr. Vortek said to his wife, ‘Now Mother, don’t worry yourself. Celia will find her companion eventually, just as you and I found each other.’

“Time continued to pass—years, and the Vorteks’ careful savings dwindled; and their daughter Celia had not altered her life in any way—with one small exception. Celia went to work at the Five and Dime Store. But afterward she came home to her family—to her mother’s cookies and lemonade and her father’s dramatic readings on the porch, to television in the evenings, and to their weekend outings in the car. Both parents grew nervous about the situation. Finally, Lois said to Stanley, ‘I don’t think we should count on some young man just walking into the Five and Dime Store for our Celia. You and I, Father, were particularly fortunate. I fear Celia may not be so lucky.’

‘What do you propose, Mother?’

“Mrs. Vortek said to Mr. Vortek who had already raised his eyebrows in expectancy, ‘I will speak with the neighbors. Perhaps someone knows a nice young man.’

“The neighbors on the street shook their heads; no, sorry, they were not acquainted with any young men for Celia. Then Mrs. Vortek inquired of the local merchants with whom she did business for so many years if perhaps they knew some nice young single man for their daughter. She even showed them a photograph. It was a half portrait, down to the waist, inadvertently revealing her daughter’s abundant endowment. “You can see she is very pretty.’

“Mr. Vortek, at this point, spoke up. ‘Beware, Mother, that the more distant the social connection, the less accountable is the young man.’

“One night soon after, thanks to all her pleading with the neighbors and merchants, a young man came courting at the door. He was dressed carefully, combed his hair neatly, shook hands with Mr. and Mrs. Vortek politely, so as soon as the door closed behind the young couple, Mrs. Vortek felt her heart lift with hope.

“Yet at the end of the evening when Celia returned home and Mrs. Vortek questioned her, ‘Did you have a nice time, dear?’ Celia did not answer. Instead, she walked straight to her bedroom in the rear of the house. Celia did not choose to mention that the nice young man had taken her to a burlesque house where she sat in the audience and kept her eyes on the piano player while up on the stage women danced naked.

“The young man did not call again, and Mr. Vortek inquired, ‘Perhaps you were not lively enough, Celia.’

“Time passed and Mrs. Vortek said, ‘We will try again.’ Celia went out to dinner with an older gentleman. Little was spoken by either party during the halibut, and immediately after dinner he brought her home.

“’We will continue in our pursuit,’ said Mrs. Vortek. And they did. Not without results. Dates came and went, but at the end of each evening Celia retreated silently to her bedroom at the rear of the house. She began biting her nails. She did not mention the man who was exceedingly fresh, thinking she was older and therefore desperate for familiarity. She did not mention the man who took out his penis and showed it to her, or the man who took her dancing and said dirty words to her on the dance floor, or the man who took her to

dinner and deliberately dropped an olive into her cleavage. One nice young man sitting with her in his car after the movie ran his hands up between her thighs and whispered to her, ‘It’s my birthday.’ And she turned the handle of the car door and walked home.

The next time her parents told her about a nice young man soon to come courting, Celia said, ‘I don’t want to.’ Mrs. Vortek drew back, startled.

Stanley Vortek said, ‘Maybe we should stop insisting for awhile.’

Mr. Vortek was becoming a softer person, more amenable, and consequently Lois Vortek stronger. They were reversing roles. Mrs. Vortek anticipated that one day either she or her husband might need the money for their own placement in a retirement facility. She assumed her full responsibility, pulled her shoulders back and saying, ‘This campaign to find a husband for Celia must continue. We must persevere.’

‘But she doesn’t want to,’ said Mr. Vortek.

‘All right. We will indulge her in a short respite.’

“With anxiety, Mrs. Vortek waited. Then one day, being very conscientious, she tried again. But again Celia said, ‘I don’t want to.’

‘Dear, all young women marry.’ Then she delivered her missile. ‘Celia, you are no longer eighteen. You are older than I was when I married. You are getting on.’ Celia ran into her bedroom furnished in dark somber wood, threw herself onto her white chenille bedspread, then turned herself around and stared through wet eyes at her milk glass bric-a-brac. And she knew that in her own home with her own parents she was no longer safe.”

I interrupted my tale. “I tell you, Annabelle, I heard the sounds of moaning coming from another room. Celia looked at me and calmly said, ‘Rhea, my mother is awake now. I must take her to the

bathroom. Excuse me, Rhea.' Then she looked at her wristwatch. 'It is almost dinnertime.'

So I said to her, 'I will come back tomorrow.'"

As I walked across the street to my own home, I looked at Johnny's driveway hoping to see his car; then at my own driveway hoping not to see Haiden's car. Perhaps Haiden parked in the garage. By the time I reached the top of my porch steps, Johnnie's screen door flew open. "A drink will be just perfect now," he called out holding a glass of wine in each hand. "Haiden isn't home; I checked." He came over.

Extending one glass toward me, he winked and flashed his candy dimples. "Let's sit down,' he said brushing a wisp of my hair away from my neck.

I jumped to the light touch of his fingers.

"Sorry!" He pulled his hand away as from a flame.

Haiden drove up at that very moment, pulled into the garage, and suddenly I was using him for an excuse not to get involved with Johnnie. "I must go in," I said.

Once inside, I stood behind the door and listened for the distancing sounds of Johnnie Banghart's footsteps.

The next day, I returned to Celia's house with a tray. After we finished our cottage cheese and peaches, I leaned forward and actually told her, I confessed, that I was in a dangerous situation. "Celia, I may be on the verge of entering into a romantic relationship with someone other than my husband."

She did not look at me. She stared straight ahead. Perhaps I had shocked her. Then from deep inside her, exactly as I remembered

those words, and just as terrible, came her shattering utterance for a second time: “Stay good.”

“Celia, explain what you mean.” But nothing more came from her mouth. I waited.

I was simply left to interpret her sparse sentences, filling in, translating. Her expression made me nervous—did she suspect that I saw myself being attracted to a man other than Haiden, starved of affection from my own husband. That I was in danger of violating my own belief in the sanctity of marriage?

b.

The next day, she simply continued on with her tale. It was as if Celia had neither slept nor eaten since. She smiled and admitted to being thirty-six when this pimply-faced young man in his early twenties came into the Five-and-Dime and inquired of her standing behind the small toys counter, “Ma-am, do you carry comic books?” She pointed in the direction of a rack against the wall and then watched to make certain he was going the right way. When he arrived in front of the rack, he stood gazing at the covers, and Celia took her afternoon break. She walked to the rear of the store and climbed the stairs to the employees’ rest area. Then she turned around to look out over the entire Five and Dime Store, which she enjoyed doing, and she saw the young man still gazing at the covers of the comic books. Then she washed her hands and reached into the employees’ little refrigerator for her snack. She sat down at the table overlooking the downstairs activity, opened her carton of milk and placed a straw inside. She opened her box of raisins, and sat chewing, staring at a platter of cookies on the table, deciding how many would be proper to take. She

took two. Fifteen minutes later, she washed her hands again and walked down the stairs, returning to her station at the small toys counter. She noticed the young man still in front of the rack, intently reading one of the comic books. She moved to another counter and helped a few customers with manicure scissors, nail files, and hairpins. On the way back to her own counter, she observed that the young man had not spotted the Little Big Books off to the side which were her favorite. Then she helped a customer to a quarter-pound of coconut-covered marshmallows. The cash register drawer was stuck, so she went to the register next to the comic books. Passing the Little Big Books, she scooped up one of them and handed it to the young man. “Are you familiar with these?”

He nodded his head. “No.”

“It’s a comic book.”

“No kidding!” He took it in his hands, and she saw that his fingernails were bitten down to the quick. But then, so were hers.

She said, “In the upper corner of each page,” and she pointed, “you see these tiny cartoons?” She waited for him to nod. “When you flip the pages very fast, the tiny cartoons look like they’re moving.”

He tried it. “Well, how do you like that! It’s a little motion picture.” He looked up at her with gratitude in his eyes. “You are very nice.”

And that was how it began. Buster Meaks and Celia Vortek became friends. Every afternoon at the same time, he came to the Five and Dime and the two of them talked together over the counter. He purchased a basket of hard wrapped candies from her at the candy counter and gave it to her; and she, in turn, invited him to accompany her upstairs into the employees’ rest area on her break, which he accepted. They both sat at the table and shared the candies,

and each day he purchased another basket of more candies and accompanied her upstairs. He came regularly for weeks during her break time and she saved all the baskets. One day he said, “Would you like to go to the zoo with me on Sunday afternoon?”

And she said, “That would be very nice.”

Celia told her parents that a young man had been stopping in at the Five and Dime Store to visit her during her afternoon breaks, and he was calling for her on Sunday to take her to the zoo.

Mrs. Vortek blurted out, “Oh, a young gentleman, Celia. Then he is coming a courting.”

Sunday arrived, and so did Buster Meaks. He knocked on the door, then wiped his shoes on the mat while he waited.

Lois Vortek, now matriarch of the Family Vortek, hurried toward the front door, running her hand over her smooth hairdo tucked into a bun in the back. She had met her own husband in the stationery store; perhaps Celia’s meeting with this young man in the Five and Dime was prophetic. Lois set her mind to liking the young man immediately. And now that Celia was thirty-five years old, she was lucky to get any —well, he was answering their prayers. This suitor would take care of their Celia, support her and provide for her all the days of her life. Smiling as broadly as possible, she swung open the door.

There he stood, young, skinny and shy, with large ears and a short haircut, chest high and hopeful, behind his bouquet of flowers. He had pasted down his cowlick—but- but this was a boy. Why, he still suffered with pimples. No. No, No. Oh, No. Absolutely not. No, <u>he</u> would never do.

At the zoo, how funny Buster was; how he made Celia laugh. He used body language to imitate the animals. In front of the monkeys, he turned his bottom lip down and scratched himself. Near the owls, he frowned and jerked his neck around in a semicircle. Standing in front of the lions he yawned, pawed and wiggled his ears. Near the elephants he reached with one arm fully extended for one peanut out of Celia's little white paper bag and worked it back into his mouth, and Celia roared with laughter until she almost fell down. Oh, when had she had a better time? She could not remember. She had stopped biting her nails.

Neither Celia nor Buster had any suspicion of Lois Vortek's feelings. "Hello, Mrs. Vortek. How are you this fine day? Is Celia ready? Hi, Mrs. Vortek, you're looking swell today. Is Celia ready? Mrs. Vortek, would you like a candy? Is Celia ready?" He appeared at the door with a bag of marbles; he appeared at the door with a box of jacks; with pick-up sticks; with a kaleidoscope; a box of clay; a drawing pad and colored pencils. He appeared with Tiddly Winks and Chinese Checkers and windup toys. And Celia always laughed with delight at his gifts. The two of them had such fun. With Buster, she played out the childhood she had somehow missed, and she had a friend.

The two of them went for drives in Buster's second-hand car, and he pointed out the front of the print shop where he worked. While they continued to meet during the week at the Five and Dime at exactly three o'clock when Celia took her break, they now also met every Sunday afternoon, sharing picnic lunches at the beach, walking barefoot on the wet sand, collecting shells. They flew kites at the park and worked yo-yos and went roller skating. She invited him into the

house and taught him how to play one duet on the piano which they then played together endlessly until Mrs. Vortek rushed into the room saying, “You’re driving me crazy.” They added Saturday nights to their time together and went to the movies and afterwards ate hot dogs at a hot dog stand. When she giggled at the mustard on his nose, he said, “I like the way you laugh.”

They added Saturday afternoons, as well, until they were seeing each other every single day of the week. And on one Saturday afternoon Celia Vortek and Buster Meaks drove off to visit an aquarium and when Celia stepped out of the car onto the grass parking lot, slipped and fell, Buster rushed around from the driver’s side calling out, “Celia, are you all right, Celia? Please, you are all right, aren’t you, darling Celia?” He saw her sitting on the ground holding her ankle and he knelt down, “Can you walk, dearest? You must be able to walk.” She stood up by herself, and he grabbed her, “You’re fine. Oh, Celia, Celia, Celia, yes, you’re fine, just fine.” And then he looked deeply into her eyes and said, “Celia dearest one, will you marry me?”

And once again, she felt safe.

A justice of the peace married them and they drove to a modest motel where he was so sweet and tender to her that she knew he, too, was a virgin. And she loved him even more, knowing it.

For their wedding breakfast, Buster went to the market and brought back a large carton of cottage cheese and a bag of peaches. He bought two blue china soup bowls and plastic spoons. He cleaned off his pocketknife to slice the peaches into wedges and he placed them on top of the cottage cheese. The room only held a bed, a bureau and one chair. So the honeymooners sat up in bed, crossed

their legs, set their bowls between their knees, and faced each other. They eagerly scooped up their bounty when Buster suddenly started feeding his share to Celia. He lapsed into baby talk, and they giggled so hard that they could barely swallow. Celia Meaks looked into her young husband's eyes and knew she had never been so happy in her entire life. She stopped biting her fingernails.

"Of course you will have a wedding reception," said Mrs. Vortek. "It serves as an official public announcement that you are indeed married. An elopement qualifies, to be sure. And a reception afterward is the proper way to proceed."

So a wedding cake was ordered from the local baker, and since there was a shortage of guests to invite, the baker himself received an invitation that included his wife. The florist who delivered the flowers attended. And also the truck driver from Trapperman's Restaurant who brought the over-sized sandwiches and plastic bowls of potato salad and cold slaw.

Most of the people on the reception list were as old as the Vorteks; they had attended Celia's baby shower but then lost touch. A few of that group had even died, but those remaining said they would be glad to come. Mr. Vortek invited one of the opticians still grinding lenses at his former place of employment, and he invited the clerk at the bookstore where he purchased his mystery novels. Mrs. Vortek invited the proprietor of the dry cleaners establishment who once arranged a date for Celia. And she invited the manager of the market who likewise arranged a date for Celia. It was suggested that Celia herself invite a few people from the Five and Dime. Buster invited his father and a young employee from the print shop whom he did not know well. Straight-backed chairs were prepared all around.

Buster's father walked up the steps onto the porch. Shyly, he peered through the screen door at the party, knocked lightly on the doorframe, but then, not being heard or noticed, opened the screen door carefully and entered. He wore cowboy boots and a string tie. His hair hung down to his shirt collar but was pomaded back, and although his fingernails were clean he seemed to have mechanic's grease in the craggy lines of his face and the grooves of his hands. Buster spotted him, smiled slowly, and came forward. "Glad you came, Dad." They shook hands and Buster led him up to Mr. Vortek and introduced him. Then Mr. Vortek called out through the crowd for Mrs. Vortek. Lois rushed into the room from the kitchen and shook hands with this man who said, "Howdy," and wreaked of cigarettes and whisky. His eyes were a watery blue, and he said that he wished Buster's mother could be here on this fine day, "but she died when Buster here was four years old. It was very hard on the boy."

"Dad, I want you to meet the bride," and he waved to Celia to come over.

Celia scurried toward them, and Buster's father was about to give her a hug but then when she came up close he somehow faltered and instead shook hands with her and said, "Buster here—uh—has always sort of heard his own drummer, Celia. He goes his own way, if you know what I mean. I had a hard time understanding him when he was growing up, so I left him pretty much to do what he wanted. His teachers in school couldn't figure him out either. Buster wasn't crazy about school—just like his old man." Then he cleared his throat. Someone brought him a glass of punch. "We haven't been as close as we might have been—uh—being so different from each other and all

that, so I'm glad to see him that he found someone who understands him."

Celia said, "Mr. Meaks, would you like a sandwich?"

"Sure." And the two of them walked together toward the food table.

A few of the neighbors on Perdue Street also attended, those families whose children took piano lessons from Celia. The children wore their party clothes and their new shoes, and they periodically circled the wedding cake and pretended to touch it. Otherwise, they sat in the straight-backed chairs and swung their legs.

c.

I surmised a great deal from Celia's words and gestures about the wedding reception and the guests. I surmised just as much from what remained unsaid because I was learning to read deeply into Celia's hesitations and unfinished sentences. Was I understanding and articulating more than Celia herself about what confronted her? One of the guests at the wedding reception was Mr. Lapper who lived at the end of the block, a short fattish man with suspenders and thick steamy glasses, who always wore a tie even in the hottest weather. On this occasion while he slipped a green mint under his tongue, he eagerly looked into Celia's eyes to examine whatever there was to examine, particularly since she was no longer a virgin. He stood close to her, searching in the pupils of her eyes for signs that she had experienced forbidden pleasures on her honeymoon. "Do you like being married, Celia?" She glanced at her young husband and smiled. Mr. Lapper analyzed the meaning of her smile, and he seemed

pleased and rewarded for his curiosity. He held out his camera, “Please, someone take a picture of me with the bride.”

The old people circled around groom, closely examining his chin for signs that he shaved regularly. “You are certainly a nice looking lad. I’m sure both of you will be very happy together.”

But when they stepped away, they put their heads together in grave concern.

“Will people think he is a younger brother?”

“You don’t think her son?”

They weighed and evaluated.

“Buster probably looks younger than his years.”

“Perhaps he is even older than she is. You can’t always tell. I heard about a man who. . . .”

“Since men marry younger women, who’s to say that older women can’t marry younger men?”

They all formed an agreeable but uneasy consensus: “One day, these mixed marriages will be common.”

The groom smiled shyly in front of his large ears and short haircut. Some said it was a silly grin; others said it was a kid’s grin. His eyes seemed lazy and his handshake soft. “So, young man, are you going to remain in the printing business?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Oh? Well, that’s all right. You’re young. Just take as much time as you need. Don’t let anybody rush you.”

“That’s right, sonny. One step too soon in any direction and you go down that path for the rest of your life. Then when you get to the other end, you realize the mistake and that’s a bad day.”

“Haste makes waste,” someone said.

“Wedding cake, everyone,” announced Mrs. Vortek.

“Gather around,” called out Mr. Vortek.

Celia giggled and rested her head on the narrow shoulder of her Buster. Yes, she felt safe with him. And together, hand over hand, they cut the first slice of the pink strawberry wedding cake. After that, Lois Vortek took over the cutting, and handed out each plate. With a broad smile, she received congratulations from each person.

After the ceremony of the cake cutting, Lois Vortek spent a great deal of her time in the kitchen washing dishes. She heard people asking Celia to play something on the piano. Buster sat down with Celia at the piano, surprising everyone, and the bride and groom performed a duet. Some guests wandered around, not quite knowing what to do with themselves and they came into the kitchen to repeat their congratulatory remarks to the mother of the bride as an opener to casual conversation.

“Well, well, well. So your Celia finally entered matrimony. You will miss her, of course, now that your little birdy will fly away.”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Buster and Celia will be living here with us until Buster finds suitable employment to support our girl.”

Suddenly, in the middle of the tale, I heard a whimpering. Rhea’s little mother was crying. Apparently her mother heard the conversation. Rhea excused herself. So I gathered up the empty bowls from the cottage cheese and peaches, set them on my tray along with the spoons, and left. I closed the door loudly enough so that she would know I left. Desiree, in her garden, caught sight of me leaving Celia’s

house. She whipped around and headed toward her own front door. An hour later, she slipped a note under my door.

> Dear Mrs. Stoakes,
>
> You befriended an unscrupulous woman. Mr. Lapper never looked at Celia until she divorced her first husband. The woman drove him wild. I am sorry to say that you betrayed my friendship.
>
> Gladys Desiree

Gladys seems ridiculously jealous, using the word “wild”.

That night in our kitchen during dinner preparations, I skirted around Haiden’s bulk as he reached in the cupboard for packages of cupcakes. I heated up a can of tomato soup, made two ham and cheese sandwiches, then ate my dinner out on the porch. Johnny Banghart’s windows were dark. He was busy at his restaurant, of course.

The next day, I returned to Celia Vortek’s door as early as I might respectfully come calling: ten o’clock in the morning,

c.

I learned that Mr. and Mrs. Buster Meaks established themselves in Celia’s bedroom in the rear of the house—with its somber dark wood furniture, the white chenille bedspread, and the milk glass bric-a-brac. There, Buster brought his clothes and his comic book collection and his Big Little Book that first brought him and Celia together. And Celia placed the two blue china bowls from their honeymoon on the dresser in front of the milk glass bric-a-brac.

The newlyweds arose cheerfully every morning, tickled each other mercilessly, laughed at the breakfast table, chattered gaily afterward while they both did the dishes, and then flew out the door toward their respective jobs. They came together for the evening meal and smiled out at Stanley and Lois while holding hands under the table. After dinner they took walks, and on Saturday mornings Buster sat quietly and doodled little cartoon figures while he listened to Celia's young piano students who lived in the neighborhood and paid her two dollars for the hour of instruction.

During the piano lessons, Buster sketched teacher and student sitting together straight on the piano bench, both looking in earnest at the music sheets: a seven-year old girl student with two braids hanging behind her that Buster comically lengthened to the floor and then all around the room like a vine of philodendron. Sometimes he drew Celia herself with two braids of philodendron but added a nest of birds in it. He sketched her nine-year-old boy student wearing a fiercely spinning propeller cap that raised him six inches above the piano bench. And sometimes he drew Celia sitting next to the boy also wearing a fiercely spinning propeller that raised her six inches above the piano bench as well. Or sometimes Buster put down his sketch pad and went out for a walk to the drugstore during the lessons and returned home devouring the last remnants of an ice cream cone and carrying a balloon for Celia, whenever possible a purple balloon because it was her favorite color. Buster handed the balloon to Celia in the middle of the piano lesson; and the young student invariably reached up for it. And then Buster would say, "No, this is for the teacher."

"You're bringing my daughter balloons again?" shouted Mrs. Vortek.

And Buster would hunch down and return to his sketch pad.

Whenever Lois Vortek saw him doodling, she told Mr. Vortek. Everything was adding up, and the Vorteks finally admitted to each other that Celia had indeed married a child.

The day came when Lois and Stanley Vortek called Celia into their bedroom, closed the door and asked her, or rather, Lois asked her, “Your husband doodles all day like a child. Don’t you think that peculiar?”

“He likes to draw,” smiled Celia.

“But he has responsibilities for a wife now. Shouldn’t he be trying to better his position in the world?”

Celia looked from one parent to the other. What were they telling her? She waited.

They waited.

“Just think about what we are saying, Celia.”

The next time they called her into their bedroom, Lois Vortek said, “Do you realize that you earn more money than Buster does? Does that not disturb you?”

Again she did not know what they were telling her.

With regularity, family meetings began to take place in their bedroom.

“Celia, what about children? It’s not too late, Celia.”

“Celia, if there are children, the load will fall on you.”

“Mark our words, Celia, you will try to support him and the children for the rest of your life, and you will never earn enough money to do that.”

Celia began to bite her fingernails again.

The weeks moved on, and the closed-door meetings accelerated. Lois Vortek's voice was becoming louder and more aggressive; and Celia was rushing out of the room in tears.

On the weekends, Buster continued to lollygag around the house or take walks with Celia or even alone. He liked to listen to the radio. But the day he carried a pile of comic books outside onto the front porch and sat down alongside Mr. Vortek who was reading his mystery novels was the day that Mrs. Vortek approached him directly. She came out onto the porch, sat down next to him, and said, "Buster, have you thought about getting the kind of work where you can make more money?"

Mr. Vortek did not look up from his book.

"I think about it, but I don't think I'm ready yet."

"When you <u>will</u> be ready, what do you think you'd like to do?"

"I don't know."

"Do you have a trade?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have any skills?"

"Skills?"

"Yes, anything that you do well?"

He smiled shyly, "I like to draw cartoons."

Mr. Vortek looked up from his reading.

"Cartoons," Buster repeated. He opened one of his comic books. "Like these."

Lois met her husband's eyes. Then she stood up, opened the screen door, and walked inside from the porch.

The four of them usually ate their dinners together. It was always a quiet affair, until one evening when Stanley Vortek spilled his soup as he shouted, “You did what?”

“I quit my job,” said Buster.

Lois covered her face with her hands and then dragged her fingers slowly down along her cheeks and looked over at Celia, as if to say, “I told you he plans to live off of you.”

Celia was just as surprised by this announcement as her parents. “But-but, what will you do now?”

“I want to draw cartoons.”

“Why?” asked Mrs. Vortek.

“It makes me feel good.”

Mrs. Vortek narrowed her eyes and glared at Celia. Celia looked at her mother helplessly.

Then Celia placed her shaking hand on her husband’s arm and said, “But, what about work?”

“Let me do my cartoons,” pulling his hand away harshly. “Don’t nag me.”

Celia drew back in alarm. She slipped away and headed toward their bedroom in the rear of the house, and there she brooded.

From then on, Buster clamped his lips together and thrust his chin out at his mother-in-law.

And she did the same to her son-in-law. Her eyes read, “Be careful, young man.”

For the next four weeks, Buster Meaks worked with grim determination all day long creating a funny little man for his cartoons. He parted the little character’s hair in the middle, gave him square spectacles and a long red and white candy-striped scarf wrapped

round his neck and sailing out behind him. Buster barely looked up at anyone. He ate his meals and returned to his sketches. Celia's mother leaned into her daughter's ear all the time. "You married a child. How could you so fool yourself?"

Every so often, Buster let out a loud laugh or a series of small giggles. He jumped up and down in his chair, rubbed his hands together, and even applauded. He began to part his own hair in the middle like his favorite little cartoon character, and he knocked out the lenses of his square sunglasses so that he could wear the frames—again like his favorite little character. He placed a mirror in front of him and began to sketch himself.

Celia's mother cried out, "Something's wrong with your husband."

I don't understand," Celia exclaimed. She did not know which way to turn.

"I'll tell you exactly what's wrong with him," said her mother. "He's an idler. Get rid of him."

"What?"

"Get rid of the parasite."

"Your mother is right," said the father looking up with vagueness.

Celia cried, "I can't. I can't do it." She ran crying to the rear of the house into her bedroom where she threw herself onto the white chenille bedspread and stared sideways at the two blue china bowls.

"Then I will." Lois said shouting after her. "Do you hear me? I will do it." She marched into the dining room where Buster sat with his cartoons spread out all over the table. "Buster," she screamed. "Buster."

Mr. Vortek gathered together his strength and his cane and made his way to the arch of the dining room.

Celia ran from her bedroom and stood beside her father. Her eyes were wild.

Mrs. Vortek shouted, “You’re a parasite, Buster Meaks. You think you can eat and sleep and doodle all day and we’re going to support you?” She stomped her feet, “Get out. Get out of our house!”

Buster looked first at Mrs. Vortek and then at Mr. Vortek—two faces as one, firmly set and glaring at him. But Celia’s face was now buried in her hands as she lay crumpled on the dining room floor, rocking back and forth.

d.

Mrs. Lois Vortek had heard the entire story. I heard Celia’s tiny mother gagging from her corner on the long sofa against the wall. I jumped up, frightened, and said, “We can continue tomorrow.” It was a terrible sound. I made an excuse: “I have things to do.”
Celia nodded. There was nothing I had to do just then—other than to get out of that house.

The next morning as I started across the street to Celia’s house, I saw the mailman coming toward me. “You have a new neighbor, Mrs. Stoakes. A woman near your age, although she wears her hair in one of those ponytails like a teenager, a pretty woman like yourself—she moved in on the other side of Johnnie Banghart. She and Mr. Banghart have a lot in common. They’ve both been married a number of times.” I had not seen Johnnie for a number of days. Restauraturs

keep crazy hours. But now I realized he was busy making the acquaintance of his new neighbor.

“By the way, Mrs. Stoakes, does Mr. Stoakes have a twin? Or possibly Mr. Stoakes has a brother who has come to stay with you? He looks so much like Mr. Stoakes.”

“No, that is Mr. Stoakes himself. He has put on weight.” My husband of fifteen years had metamorphosed into a hairy poundaged caterpillar.

Ever so lightly did I tap Celia’s doorknocker. No doubt her father had selected it, with his penchant for mystery novels; many of them seeming overly dramatic Gothic tales by their titles. Celia opened the door saying, “I would like to take my mother outside on the porch.” So I stepped back and she led her mother by the hand to one of chairs. Celia propped up two pillows behind her mother who was so little in her extreme advanced age that she could not see over the half-wall of the porch or be seen from the other side.

As soon as we settled down, Celia took up her story and her eyes slowly deadened. She said that Buster had gone, and she resumed her former life. That is, she continued to work at the Five and Dime; and she gave piano lessons to very young children in the neighborhood; and she sat out on the shaded front porch in the afternoon and listened to her father read aloud. Her mother carried out a tray of cookies and lemonade, but no longer waited patiently for the opportunity to tell her own courtship story. Instead, Mrs. Vortek spent her time worrying aloud that Celia would pass another birthday with them and still another. She came to a conclusion. “Stanley, apparently we have made our Celia’s life entirely too comfortable here with us. She has her little job at the Five and Dime and she is not ambitious to advance there. The girl is perfectly satisfied.”

Mr. Vortek sighed.

"We must be firm, Father. For hundreds of years, parents have arranged their children's marriages. Yes, we must be firm for Celia's own good. It is our responsibility."

That was the attitude of my own parents. They were responsible for my marrying Haiden. They had coaxed me.

Mr. Vortek looked at his wife woefully and groped with his words. He said, "Perhaps Celia should consider an older gentleman who will already have some security."

"Yes, an older gentleman."

"Not too old, though."

"Not too old. Although we must keep in mind that our Celia is getting on," she said.

"Perhaps—ask the neighbors and merchants again about a possible suitor."

"Yes, I will do just that."

Mr. Norton Lapper, the neighbor down at one end of Perdue Street, first learned about Celia from the mailman. Mr. Lapper was that short, fat man at the wedding reception, the man with suspenders and thick steamy glasses, who always wore a tie even in the hottest weather. The man who asked someone to take a photograph with his camera of Celia and himself. Mr. Lapper now looked out at the mailman and hung on the word, "divorcee". That very same day, Mr. Lapper also overheard the baker's wife who was standing behind the counter talking to her husband about Celia Vortek. "She was married just long enough, you will excuse me, to lose her virginity. Now what is she? Not a spinster."

“She is a divorcee,” offered Mr. Norton Lapper raising his eyebrows. “My goodness, what happened?”

“Who knows?” said the baker, shrugging his shoulders. “Maybe the great age difference was just too great.”

“Is that so?” exclaimed Mr. Norton Lapper.

“It’s tragic,” said the baker’s wife. “They were only married seven or eight months.”

“I remember the wedding reception,” said Mr. Lapper.

Then the baker himself said, “Only seven or eight months! She’s still almost a virgin.”

“Sir,” said Mr. Norton Lapper, “either a woman is a virgin or she is not.”

“Oh, you know what I mean,” said the baker.

The baker’s wife said, “Her parents urged her to return to her maiden name and completely erase him from memory. They said, ‘It is for the best, Celia.’” Then the baker’s wife clasped her hands together, one over the other as if holding her purse in front of her; she hiked up her shoulders and declared with full authority, “I think something shocking happened in that bedroom.”

Mr. Lapper’s nostrils quivered, and, then and there, he formed his plan. He would visit Celia Vortek, divorcee.

Fingering his bow tie, and then touching his boutonnière, he stood in the doorway the following morning, and Celia did not know quite what to do with him. “Won’t you come in, Mr. Lapper.”

Mr. and Mrs. Vortek were already sitting in the living room with their second cup of coffee. They looked up. Mr. Lapper appeared fifteen or twenty years older than Celia even with the careful finger wave in his remaining hair.

“Won’t you come in, Mr. Lapper. May I offer you a cup of coffee?” sang out Mrs. Vortek.

“Thank you, yes,” never taking his eyes off Celia.

Mrs. Vortek noticed this and signaled to her husband. Together, they excused themselves from the room.

Mr. Lapper leaned forward from his seat on one of the short sofas and said to Celia in a most confidential tone, “Please know that I am sympathetic about your unsettled state. I have come to offer my shoulder and/or any diversion.”

Celia said nothing.

“Would you be interested in taking lunch with me sometime? Perhaps at Trapperman’s Restaurant? It is a very lively place.”

Soon enough, Mrs. Vortek brought in the cup of coffee and said, “Celia, your father and I are driving to the market. You will manage your own lunch today.”

“Pardon me, Mrs. Vortek,” said Mr. Lapper. “It will be my honor to escort Celia out for lunch.”

“Oh, how delightful,” said Mrs. Vortek.

“A booth, please, very private,” said Mr. Lapper as he guided Celia by the elbow, holding tightly. They walked behind the hostess, passing tables densely packed with noisy people and heavily laden with food, pickle prongs sprouting from every table jar. The hostess stopped at the last booth in the dark corner. She switched on the tiny wall lamp with the red shade.

“Excellent,” said Mr. Lapper as he slipped a tip to the hostess.

The hostess handed the menus to them, then quickly left.

Mr. Lapper leaned forward. “Can you imagine what secret conversations took place here in this booth? It lends itself to intimacy,” he grinned, snapping the straps of his suspenders.

Celia looked down at the menu for a long time and eventually said, “I’ll have a turkey sandwich on rye.”

“A very nice choice. Lean and light. You are watching your girlish figure. But I prefer the fatted corned beef sandwich, juicy, even greasy, ah, my mouth waters,” said Mr. Lapper raising his hand for a waiter. “My dear, when I learned of your recent divorce, I was saddened. A person marries with such hopes. Well, we shall not speak of it again, for that is none of my business and it is in the past.”

A waiter arrived, and Mr. Norton Lapper read the name on his lapel. “Sol, my man, we would like to place our orders.” To Celia, “My dear, would you like a glass of wine with your lunch?”

Celia shook her head, no no no. “I do not drink wine.”

“Mm. Perhaps one day you will permit me to introduce you to that world of delights.” He smiled at her and then asked the waiter to bring him a glass of burgundy along with the sandwich orders.

“Now then,” Mr. Lapper laced his fingers together and said to Celia, “So here you are, a mature woman cast adrift and placed in a very precarious category. I do not wish to alarm you, my dear, but rather to warn you with what I am about to say.”

Celia looked at him, bewildered.

“Men will be swarming around you—and again excuse my language because it is only intended to warn you—men will search for your scent. If you know what I mean.”

She looked at him blankly.

The glass of burgundy arrived. Mr. Lapper raised it in the air, admired its color, “Beautiful, absolutely beautiful!” and blinked as if

to bring him back from some distant point. “To your future happiness, Celia Vortek.” He tilted his head back, gulped a large swig, swished it around in his mouth like mouthwash, swallowed it, smacked his lips, and said, “Ah, that was wonderful. How about one sip, Celia?”

She shook her head, no.

“Well, one day.” Suddenly he replaced the wine glass on the table, and withdrew a small camera from his lapel pocket. “Do you mind if I take a picture of you, Celia?”

She smiled.

Snap. “Thank you, my dear. I will develop the picture in my darkroom and have endless hours enjoying your charming face and wondering about you.” He returned the camera to his pocket, patted it, and pulled his wine glass closer. He tilted his head back a second time and gulped another large swig. “Pickle?” he offered. She shook her head, no. He reached in with the prongs, selected a big fat one, and bit into it with his chipmunk teeth. “Mmm. Someday I would like to teach you how to eat plump pickles.” He slid the pickle in and out of his mouth repeatedly and stared at her, raising and lowering his eyebrows. She couldn’t understand why he did that. Finally the sandwiches arrived. Mr. Lapper grabbed his sandwich between pudgy fingers and bit off one enormous mouthful after another, aggressively working his way through it like a giant machine devouring everything in its path. A strand of fatted corned beef hung momentarily out the side of his mouth as he chewed and continued to talk. Then it disappeared as if into a trap. “You see, there are all kinds of men with their own particular specialties. Some men in the Orient, for example, are attracted to the nape of a woman’s neck. I am sure you know that. And then there are men who like the inside of an elbow or a thigh where the skin is particularly tender. Moving upward from the

knee”—he stopped, his sandwich suspended—“there are those men who like—ah, mmm, there is a famous line in Madame Bovary—but to remember the exact words, tst, tst, tst, something like, mmm, like, ‘His world lay inside the circumference of her long skirt.’ Yes, something like that.” His face turned purple and his eyes began to roll. “That is—ah, that is the man to beware of, for he is, in the beginning, a”—and he leaned forward to whisper it and it came out as from a dark hole on moist vapor: “A panty sniffer.” He stared at her, his eyes ready to pop out, his sandwich trembling—and then he leaned back stiffly.

Celia slowly ate her turkey sandwich.

Their waiter approached. “Would you like to order dessert?” He looked at Celia and she began to study the menu. He looked at Mr. Lapper who began to relax. “Sir? Are you all right?”

Mr. Lapper nodded.

“I will have the lemon cream pie,” said Celia slowly to the waiter.

After lunch, Mr. Lapper drove Celia home. He did not talk much. He whistled.

“Thank you for lunch, Mr. Lapper,” she said at her front door and walked inside by herself.

The following morning, Mr. Lapper brought flowers and candy when he appeared at Celia's door about eleven o'clock. Mrs. Vortek answered the door and sang out, "Come in, Mr. Lapper."

Celia and her father were sitting together on one of the short sofas; they looked up from their deck of cards.

"I have come to invite Celia for lunch where we can have another nice conversation," said Mr. Lapper.

"I would rather not," said Celia.

"What?" said her mother.

"Another time." Mr. Lapper bowed slightly, deposited his gifts of flowers and candy with Mrs. Vortek, excused himself, and left.

Mrs. Vortek turned around to Celia, her eyes blazing. "You refused him after he brought you flowers and candy! How could you?"

"I would rather not," said Celia.

Mr. Vortek, equally baffled by Celia's behavior, joined in. "Three years from now, Celia, you-you-you will be forty years old."

"Mr. Lapper is so refined," said Mrs. Vortek. "And he has money. I don't think he works. Investments, undoubtedly," said Mrs. Vortek.

"Yes," said Mr. Vortek.

Several days passed and Mr. Lapper called again. "Perhaps your daughter would prefer to see a play or attend a concert."

Mrs. Vortek said to him, "I'll see if I can help."

Celia had not changed her mind.

On the occasion of Celia's thirty-seventh birthday at home with her parents, a few people were invited, including Mr. Norton Lapper. When Mr. Lapper brought an Italian music box made of highly polished inlaid woods and it played three tunes and a ballerina turned around and around to the tinkle of the music. He said, "It belonged to my mother." Well, everyone was charmed by the gift, even Celia, and the courtship began.

Each time Norton Lapper arrived to escort Celia out for the evening, he brought a fine gift: an amethyst necklace—"My mother's." He brought a beaded evening bag, a silk fan, an antique fan. "All, my mother's." Mr. and Mrs. Vortek were touched by his attachment to his mother. This was a sign of very good character.

Mr. Lapper escorted Celia to the Performing Arts Center, introducing her to musical comedies, and she seemed lively and attentive. On the occasion of a Mozart concert she fell asleep during the second movement. So after the performance, he was careful to take her to an ice cream parlor and treat her to an elaborate dish of ice cream with several different kinds of topping. And as they left, he bought her some candy at the counter.

"You must marry him, Celia," sighed Mrs. Vortek on Mother's Day after she herself opened a five-pound box of chocolates, The card read:

'To a charming Mother who raised an enchanting Daughter,
Norton Lapper'

"Mother is right, Celia," said Stanley Vortek a month later on Father's Day—a good day for him, intelligence and coherence temporarily restored,— having just received from Mr. Lapper the

complete set of Sherlock Holmes mysteries in leather bindings. “You should-should marry him. He will provide well for you.”

“Yes, Celia. We have decided for you.” Mrs. Vortek brought to her cheek the lavender scented lace handkerchief that Mr. Lapper sent to her for no reason at all.

“But I would rather stay with you,” said Celia.

“That is just the point,” said her mother. “Staying with us is not healthy for you. Celia, you must take Mr. Lapper. You are getting too old to stay with your parents. It is a disgrace. The parent birds must push the young out of the nest. It is a fact of life.”

f.

Annabelle telephoned. “Rhea, I haven’t heard from you in days, in weeks, in months. How is everything going?”

It was not her business that I now slept out on the porch. And it was further not her business that I was interested in having an affair with Johnnie Banghart. “Can’t talk now, Annie. I’ll call you.”

“Has that neighbor been flirting with you?”

“No.”

“What does Haiden have to say about it?”

“Haiden wouldn’t care. He’s involved with a new gal.”

“You mean there’s someone who replaced this Katie Shiner? Someone other than you?” She squinted up her eyes and said, “If you’re not having any sex with your own husband, I say go ahead with that attractive neighbor. You have nothing stopping you.”

Annabelle guessed Haiden’s celibacy with me.

“How do you know I want to have an affair?” I said.

“It’s called, ‘I’ll show you that I’m still desirable. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander.’ Besides, if you’re not having sex with your own husband, you are entitled to reach out.”

“And what about the sanctity of the marriage contract, Annabelle,” I said.

“What’s so valuable about the sanctity of marriage in this kind of a case?”

“The principle is at stake. The institution of marriage. Someone has to hold to it.”

“You don’t make any sense.”

“Oh yes I do.”

“Calm down.”

I hated to admit that Annabelle was appealing to my baser instinct.

“Let’s say he *is* having a fling,” said Annabelle. “Are you willing to forgive him for violating the marriage contract and come back to you afterward as if nothing happened? What kind of principle is that? You are saying a priest can preach holiness, go out and kill a man, and continue to be a priest as if nothing happened?

“The church still stands.”

“But not the priest.”

“I’m the church.”

“You’re being too intellectual about this. A woman in your place isn’t that rational. Rhea, you’re talking out of one side of your mouth. You just don’t want to tell me where you are emotionally.”

“Goodbye, Annie.”

A note from Johnnie lay on top of my computer:

Am working nights this week. Mike and Sylvia

are looking forward to Monday's dinner party at
your place.
So am I.

Johnnie

g.

The wedding ceremony was very private. A justice of the peace came to the house and Mr. and Mrs. Vortek served as the only witnesses. But for the wedding reception afterward, the guest list included largely the same people who had attended the first wedding reception, so the talking and whispering continued from where it left off.

"This time, she is marrying someone a great deal older instead of someone a great deal younger."

"Maybe he's not that much older."

"So what if there is an age difference? Older men marry younger women all the time."

"At least this time, the groom won't be living with the in-laws. Norton Lapper has plenty of money."

"How do you know? Just because he drives a big car?"

"He has investments, they say."

"But they moved into his house which is no grander than any of the others in the neighborhood."

"I don't know. I've never been inside. Has anyone?"

"Someone said he knows a lot about cameras."

"He has his own darkroom, they say."

"It's hard to know what he does. His windows are completely shuttered. A person can't see a thing inside."

“What does he do with all his photographs?”

“What does anyone do?”

“Wedding cake!” sang out Mrs. Vortek. “Gather around.”

Norton Lapper giggled and pulled Celia’s stiff body close. Placing his clammy hand over hers which were exceedingly dry, together they cut the first slice. Lois Vortek then took over cutting slices for everyone. She welcomed all the congratulatory remarks and was very talkative.

“Celia, where are you going on your honeymoon?” asked one of the guests.

“To my house,” laughed Norton Lapper. “Celia has never been inside it, ha ha.”

One guest whispered to another, ”He’s stingy. Bad luck for Celia.”

“No, no. He’s just teasing.”

Two days later on Perdue Street, Norton Lapper stepped outdoors beyond his shuttered porch, still in his robe and slippers, looking for the morning newspaper on the driveway. It was the middle of the afternoon. This piece of information was noted in the neighborhood with a smile. It was also trash day. The groom dropped empty wine bottles into the bin. The following afternoon, which was the third day, the bride and groom were seen at the market together pushing one cart. The day after that, the fourth day, Mr. and Mrs. Lapper were not seen. On the fifth day, Celia stood outdoors watering with the garden hose, watering for hours. On the sixth day, she was seen outdoors the entire day watering again. On the seventh day, one week from the day of the wedding reception, Sunday afternoon, the

bride and groom walked down the street to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Vortek for Sunday dinner.

The newlyweds had settled down and so had the neighborhood, each to a routine. The mailman delivered the mail; children ran their bicycles over the sidewalks; young mothers stood out front in small clusters talking together; and in the afternoons, the stammering voice of Mr. Stanley Vortek, growing stronger all the time, could be heard over the neighborhood from his front porch as he read aloud to Mrs. Vortek from his mystery novels.

But in the middle of the second week, Celia Lapper came running down the street to her parents' house. She was perspiring. She ran into the kitchen where her mother was preparing an apple pie. "Mother!" she gasped, her hair flying in front of her wide eyes and in her teeth; she was almost incoherent. She said that she wanted to come home.

"What's that?" her mother exclaimed, setting down her paring knife. "I don't believe my ears."

"Please. He is mean to me." She started blubbering, covering her words with her handkerchief as she wiped her nose.

"If he is mean to you, then you must be an even better wife. You must be as cooperative as you possibly can, do everything he asks; and then he will not be mean to you."

"But I must tell you what he asks me to do. He—"

Mrs. Vortek clamped the palms of her hands over her ears and said, "No, I will not listen. Not another word. Marriage is a private business, Celia. It is not for the ears of anyone else. You must deal with your problems and make your adjustments. Every couple goes through these little differences."

"I can't."

"You have no choice."

"I want to come home."

Mrs. Vortek adjusted her pince-nez eyeglasses. "You are home, with your husband. It is time to grow up, Celia. Your husband supports you now; and, in return, you provide comfort and services for him. It is an arrangement. That is what marriage is. An arrangement, Celia. If you think you can come to our house and live with us, you are mistaken. That is not the way life goes on. And you cannot support yourself on your small position at the Five and Dime. Your husband will support you. Now turn yourself around and go home." Mrs. Vortek put her hands on her daughter's shoulders, spun her around, and said, "Go on. Have the right attitude and try your best. Out you go."

The accident occurred two weeks later. The houses in the neighborhood, being so old and suffering ground shifts and open cracks, there was an ever diligent lookout for bugs. The hot weather was bringing them out in droves. The accident had something to do with the cockroaches. An ambulance sounded its alarm and a police car drove up behind it. Neighbors rushed out. "What happened?" One talked with another, but no one knew anything.

Two men wheeled a gurney inside through the front door of the Ladder house. A second police car drove up and parked beside the first. "What's going on, officers?" someone asked. More neighbors gathered. "Does anybody know what happened?" A third car pulled up—a civilian car with two men in regular clothes. All the men entered the house. The neighbors stood on the sidewalk and stretched their necks each time the porch door swung open. All they saw were

cameras everywhere on tall tripods, very professional looking. Had the police brought them? The neighbors conjectured without any information. Someone left and came back with a folding chair. Others went home for coffee and returned carrying steaming mugs. The gurney suddenly appeared again, this time coming out with a sheet covering a body. “Who is it? Can you see who it is?” The ambulance sped away without sounding its alarm. Eventually, everyone left.

Mr. and Mrs. Vortek down the street were not at home for any of this excitement. They learned what had actually happened the same way all the neighbors learned—by opening their newspaper the following day.

MORE ACCIDENTS OCCUR IN THE HOME THAN ANYWHERE ELSE

> Mr. Norton Lapper of 301 Perdue Street was showering when he spotted several cockroaches marching along the tiled ledge above him. He called his wife to bring him a small foot stool which he then placed inside the shower, stepped on, reached up with his wash cloth for the cockroaches, slipped, hit his head against the shower head, and fell unconscious. The blow was of such severity that he died from internal bleeding by the time the ambulance arrived. Mr. Lapper was found lying on the shower floor with the wash cloth still in his hand and two cockroaches inside.

Mr. and Mrs. Vortek came running down the street from their house. They rang the doorbell. No answer. They peered through

the little peek window in the door. The shade was up. No sign of life inside. Mrs. Vortek said, “Maybe she is not at home. Maybe she took a sedative and is napping. This has been quite an ordeal for Celia. Why didn’t she call us?”

They telephoned later in the day. No answer. “Do you think something is wrong over there? Let’s go over there again.” They walked fast, rang the doorbell, nothing. They peered through the peek window in the door. Suddenly, a hand reached up from the other side, pulled down the little shade, and that was that. The parents stared at each other, uncomprehendingly. Again they pounded on the door. “Celia. Celia. What’s wrong? Let us help you.” They pounded relentlessly until they finally stopped and walked away in utter bewilderment.

Weeks passed, and the Vorteks still had not seen their daughter. Mr. Vortek, while rereading one of his old mystery novels on the front porch, “The Bludgeoning of Dr. Orth”—one of his favorites which he had read aloud several times to his family—suddenly grabbed his left arm, and called out to his wife. He called out several times, each time more faintly than the last. When Mrs. Vortek finally came out to the porch, Mr. Vortek was still sitting in his chair, covered with beads of perspiration. “Stanley, what is it?” She bent down. He whispered something in her ear and slumped over. Mrs. Vortek bolted upright and stared straight ahead. A few moments later, she groped her way to the screen door, apparently to get inside and call the doctor, but then she herself dropped to the floor.

By the time the mailman found them—in the afternoon—Mr. Vortek was dead. Mrs. Vortek was curled up where she had fallen, one hand drawn up like a claw and pulled in close to her body.

The organ music sounded. “Stanley Vortek was such a nice quiet man,” said one neighbor to another at the funeral.

“He was an old-fashioned gentleman.”

“Lois Vortek is worse off than he is.”

“You’re right. I’d rather have a heart attack and die right off than be in her condition.”

Everyone looked around expecting to see Celia. But Celia stayed at home that day.

When the neighbors returned to Perdue Street after the funeral, they saw that Celia Vortek had put all of Mr. Lapper’s camera equipment out on the lawn for pickup. She had emptied the house of all kinds of strange equipment and furniture and asked the movers to bring her old bedroom furniture down from the Vortek house to the Lapper house that now became the Vortek house. Celia moved her mother into the house, and took care of her.

Mrs. Vortek, Senior, was as helpless as a baby and required full-time care. Celia Vortek—she had resumed her maiden name—now sat with her mother out on the front porch every afternoon where Celia took up her father’s habit of reading from his mystery novel collection. The books were housed in two bookshelves out there beneath interweaving honeysuckle and morning glory vines, and Celia merely reached over for any one of the stories and began reading aloud. Her mother sat, silent and staring. It appeared as if she were listening.

I almost staggered across the street from Celia's house, so shaken was I by her tale. But still the tale was not complete because a writer's imagination is something fierce. Perhaps I misinterpreted or filled in too liberally. So many gaps and silences. But even so, I surmised one more part still lay buried deep at the bottom of Celia's treasure trunk. As I prepared my own lunch, cutting a section from a salmon loaf and placing it in the oven, I was preoccupied with the undisclosed part still buried. How was I to get hold of Mr. Vortek's book collection? What pretext? And then it could take years; there were so many books. But, of course, I could scan them; that would be enough. Yes, I could manage that.

The following day, I visited Celia again. "I have a favor to ask." I told her I was interested in her father's book collection because I was doing some research for a mystery novel of my own. She accepted my motive, and led me out onto the porch, to the half wall facing the street, wildly covered with honeysuckle and morning glory vines. There stood two wooden bookcases fronted with glass doors. She left me to my explorations while she returned to the house and led her mother out where the two of them now sat together and watched me. I selected one book after another, building a tall stack of novels. "Celia, I would like to take these books to my house for a few days. And when I finish with them, it may be necessary for me to borrow some more. Is that all right with you?"

"We are friends, Rhea."

My next utterance simply jumped out: "By the way, Gladys Desiree told me she was in love with Mr. Norton Lapper." It simply jumped out. I could not take it back.

Celia lifted her eyes to meet mine. “She did not know Mr. Lapper.” At that moment she shivered as if a chill passed through her.

“Gladys says Mr. Lapper was particularly nice to her; in fact, he courted her.”

“Maybe before. But Mr. Lapper preferred women who,” she faltered, “had already been married.”

“Really! Why do you think that was so?”

She did not offer an answer.

I waited. Perhaps she did not know. I glanced at her mother who maintained her look of perpetual shock.

Suddenly Celia burst out, “He was a bad man.”

I caught my breath.

Her face darkened and closed up. The prettiness passed out of it.

Yes, Celia did know. But she was unwilling to tell me or incapable of speaking the words. For the first time, my writer’s imagination could not conjure up the missing part. I could not invent it.

I glanced at her little mother. Her eyes, always black and shining like beetles, now were jiggling.

During the following few days, I neglected everything in my life to comb through Mr. Vortek’s mystery novels, coming upon every kind of murder: poisoning, gunshot, hanging, strangulation, stabbing, drowning, suffocation. I felt possessed. And where was Haiden all this time? He could have been in the house, but I refused to search for him. It was better for me not to look at his face or hear his voice. He probably did not want to be seen in his present condition.

On Monday morning I telephoned my writing instructor Mr. Wheeler and breathlessly talked about my novel. He listened quietly and finally said, “You’ve got something now, Rhea, I’ll tell my agent that soon you’ll be sending him the completed manuscript.”

I could barely contain myself with such encouragement. That afternoon as I marched around the dining room, setting the table for the dinner party with the Trappermans and Johnnie, I realized the irony that Haiden would be absent from his favorite activity—presiding over the table, preaching, reciting, casting his spellbinding oratory—when suddenly there he was, leaning against the door frame. I turned and blurted out Mr. Wheeler’s hopeful words to me about the manuscript. Haiden’s huge bulk came to life and he said, “I’m leaving now.” No words of good luck or congratulations. Nothing.

“Go about your business,” I said, giving him permission to further enjoy his failures, and perhaps be jealous of my success. I refused to suffer as he would have me do with the guilt of his invention. I was proceeding with a life apart from his.

Barely one week had passed since I began visiting Celia and now I was fully into my research. The doorbell! I pulled off my apron, hurried toward the entry, and opened the peek hole window. “We can see yoooou, Rhea,” noisily came the good cheer. I threw open the door, and Mike Trapperman thrust a bottle of dark liqueur in front of his polka dot tie. Sylvia exuded an expensive perfume from her bright blue suit with its large brass buttons as she placed into my hands a box of chocolates tied with a fat diagonal red bow. And Johnnie sprouted a bouquet of flowers from behind his back and planted a kiss on my cheek.

“Come in, come in, come in everybody.”

Johnnie wrapped his arms around me so nurturingly that I wanted to cry with relief. Where had he been these last few days?

The conversation at the dinner table was jolly; everyone ate heartily; and Mike Trapperman said while cutting into my roast, “I never would have imagined your type with Johnnie. He’s—well, he’s —,” twitching parts of his face, reaching for the right words, “and you’re not.” Everyone laughed.

Then Sylvia said with a full cheek of food, “It’s about time Johnnie found someone who can cook. He has suffered bad luck with women.”

“We just want him to be with one nice lady and have a nice home life,” said Mike.

“Whoah,” Johnnie laughed. “You see, Rhea, Mike and Sylvia don’t want me to end up alone like Gladys and Celia.”

“Oh, then you people know those ladies?” I said.

“Johnnie talks about both of them all the time.”

“I talk about Gladys because she amuses me. I talk about Celia because I feel sorry for her.”

Sylvia moved in closer to me. “Johnnie has such a compassionate heart; he likes women—all shapes, all types, all ages. Each of his wives was so different, one from the other.”

“I don’t think it’s healthy to live alone,” Mike declared.

“A person can live with another but still be alone,” I said.

Sylvia sighed deeply and her brass buttons moved. “We can see that Gladys is something of a fruitcake toward men. She must have tried everything. She’s still trying, according to Johnnie. To be perfectly frank, I’m sure the woman’s still a virgin. But instead of her appetite for men drying up, it takes almost nothing to excite her—according to Johnnie. She’s amazing. I believe she has known nothing

of men in the real world; and maybe because of it she appears to be slightly over-sexed."

"My wife has quite an imagination. She reads a lot of those romance novels. Oh, excuse me, do you write romance novels, Rhea?"

"I'm doing research for a mystery novel."

Sylvia jumped in. "We have four daughters. Girls talk about such things. And I, too, am one of the girls, just older."

"Do you have an opinion of Celia?" I asked.

"Celia? Ooh, now that's got to be a messy story." Sylvia rolled her eyes. "I don't know what's going on there, but why would a woman who has been married twice let herself look like that? As if she doesn't want men coming near her? As if she wants to forget that she was ever a woman? And that cleaning business in the middle of the night—?"

"You know about that, too?" said Sylvia.

"Johnnie told us. Well, what's that all about?" Sylvia asked.

"Gladys says it's guilt."

"Guilt?" chorused the others.

"For stealing Gladys' lover. Gladys considers Celia greedy for taking a second husband while she herself had not even taken a first."

The men laughed.

"That makes sense, Rhea," said Mike Trapperman. "You are a clear-thinking woman, Rhea; I'm glad Johnnie and you are—are friends."

"The two old women to this day never speak with each other," Sylvia said.

"What's for dessert?" asked Mike.

"Apple pie. But the ice cream is too hard."

Sylvia stood up. "I'm coming in the kitchen to help."

She followed me and closed the door behind her. That meant a confidential conversation was coming. Sylvia began, “How much do you know about Matilda?”

“I know that she was a singer and she died of heart failure.”

“Half true. The part about being a singer.”

“What do you mean?”

“Matilda didn’t die. She ran off. She was always running off with one of the musicians, and one day she just never came back. It took a terrible toll on Johnnie. He decreed her dead. Yet, in spite of himself, he searches for her in every woman he meets. He thought he found her in his second wife and then in his third.” She shook her head. “We knew they were wrong for him. His whole life since Matilda’s desertion has been one big rebound. It’s such a shame. The man has a heart to love someone.” She squeezed the container of ice cream, “Soft now,” and reached for the scooper. She dropped a scoop on each slice of pie. “The problem is he has too much of a heart.”

“Why is that a problem?”

“He feels other people’s pain; and that’s because he himself gets hurt too easily. In a nutshell, the man is too sensitive.”

“Mike and I think he should marry you. That’s what he’s telling Johnnie while we’re out here in the kitchen.”

By the end of the evening, I felt like the newest member of Johnnie’s family. But I wondered what the Trapperman’s were going to do about that young ponytailed gal Johnnie was now interested in. “We’ll have you over for dinner in our home so our girls can meet you.” They hugged and kissed me goodnight and left. Johnnie and I waved from the front porch.

As their car sped away down the street, Johnnie stood behind me whispering along my neck, “We’re like a couple of married people

waving goodnight to our guests. Time to go in." He put his arm on my shoulder and led me indoors. "No one's home, just the two of us. Any pie left, Rhea, while you tell me your story?"

"What story?"

"The Haiden and Rhea story."

"Not interested."

He made himself comfortable in my kitchen, settling down in a chair, hiked his legs up over one corner of the table, and then watched me move about.

"Two scoops?" I asked.

He nodded.

I served the dessert and sat down on the opposite side of the table. Johnnie smiled at me—I apparently amused him. Then tilting his chair back— Look at that mischievousness in his eyes; he's playing with me, like a cat with a mouse— "So tell me, how did you and your husband meet?"

I stood up and brought the coffee pot to the table and set it down heavily on the hot plate. "Is that really important?"

"I have a need to know." Johnnie reached for the coffee pot and poured out the steaming dark liquid into his cup.

"The story is typical. I met Haiden at church, admired him, married him, and formed an arrangement where first I would support him through college and then he would do the same for me." I shifted in my chair.

"And eventually you would receive the education you wanted and graduate?"

I did not answer him.

"Did you ever love him?"

I said, “Haiden was not successful in business. And eventually, he couldn’t take any more rejection and simply closed up shop.”

“He closed up shop, as you say, and that meant there was not money to send you to college. Is that it?”

“Something like that. He had a psychological breakdown. I was simply an outer victim of his internal problems.”

“Is it possible that he calculated your never having a college education? After all, if you had had your college, it was quite possible that you would have done better than he. Could he have handled that?”

“You think he held me back on purpose?”

“That’s for you to decide.”

“Well, we managed. I sold our first house and bought this one near the college to rent out rooms. With the income, I am able to attend college.”

“You moved forward despite not having completed your formal education. You are succeeding despite him. Would he have married you if you had already been a college graduate?”

Johnnie threw a thunderbolt.

“Your husband compensated for his failures. He carefully constructed a home life to protect himself from facing his own failures, and he was successful in his illusion. And you supported his fantasy. That is, until you became your own person. More pie, please.” He held up his dish. “When a person knows her course—such as you do, she is indomitable. She gives off an essence.”

“But I behave the same as I always have.”

“It doesn’t matter. You are different. You became a gold brick, and he sees you as a gold brick. So what does that make him? Terra cotta, my girl, plain dull, flat adobe.”

“He must hate me.”

Just then, we heard a car drive up. “That must be Haiden,” I said.

“He’ll see us together at this late hour and register that the gold brick can do whatever she likes because she is a gold brick. Untouchable in your success.”

Haiden entered. “Good evening John. Rhea.”

“Would you like to join us for some dessert, Haiden?” I asked.

“No thank you. It’s been a long day. I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

We watched Haiden lumber out of the room. His body was truly obese now.

Johnnie and I remained quiet for a few moments and listened to Haiden shuffle down the hall.

“And where are the kiddies?” Johnnie asked.

“It didn’t happen. Low sperm count.” I was sorry I said that.

“Did you want children?”

“Maybe.”

“That means yes. I hear the siren going off in Haiden’s head: ‘I didn’t deliver; I didn’t deliver; I didn’t deliver.’”

“I’m not so sure he ever wanted children. Besides, I never pressured him for children.”

“You didn’t have to. You’re the kind who wants children.”

“He’s just having a midlife.”

“Rhea, do you know what a midlife crisis is? It is a time when we men measure our achievements. But Haiden’s case is a little different. He started his crisis long ago.”

“You’re so sure.”

“I know what I’m talking about.”

“Then you yourself suffered a Midlife Crisis?”

“Matilda’s career took off, while I was still a corned beef and pickle man. I knew I would always be one, but I blamed her for throwing it up in my face.”

“Did you act like Haiden?” A faucet turned on somewhere in the house. Then it turned off. Haiden’s removal was positively chilling.

“I was just the opposite. I became possessive. The more Matilda’s career took up her time, the more attention I demanded. We had knockdown verbal fights when I didn’t receive what I felt I needed.”

“Is Haiden getting ready to leave me?”

“He has already left.”

I nodded, “Of course.”

“This is a good time for us, Rhea. You and me.”

He placed his hand over mine.

“Did you hear me, Rhea? This is a good time for us.”

I wanted him to say that, didn’t I? And yet, when I actually heard the words, they seemed calculated, maneuvered. I pulled my hand away from his and stood up. I walked over to the window. Everything was dark across the street. This was not one of Celia’s troubled nights. Johnnie stood up and followed me to the window. He twirled me around to face him. He took me in his arms and was about to kiss me, but I whispered, “I am not the replacement for Matilda.”

“And I am not the replacement for Haiden.”

He said goodnight.

Haiden was asleep when I entered our bedroom. His increased bulk had intensified the fervor and volume of his snoring. I slipped into my nightgown and walked out to the porch. I opened the small cupboard for my blanket and pillow and spread them out on the

hammock. The moon shone cold. The night was black. Not a sign of life anywhere. Haiden slept at the far end of the house, yet I could hear his snoring from out here on the porch.

Haiden slept. Johnnie slept. Gladys slept. The neighborhood children slept. Even Celia slept. But I knew I would not sleep. I thought about what was lacking in my marriage. It was more than sex. I had to move my mind onto something else or go crazy. I grabbed Mr. Vortek's pile of books.

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The entire night passed away in this fashion where I poured over one volume after another. No one saw me hunched over, flipping pages, reaching for each book. I read by the light of my lamp and by the moon glow. The stars flickered, and the neighbors dreamed their dreams. Somewhere in the distance under eves of houses pigeons cooed, and in watery garden pools frogs croaked, and then the sky grew light, and it was morning.

Johnnie's screen door opened and slammed back fast, and I almost jumped out of my seat. He came to the side of his porch nearest mine, sat on the ledge, and all bright and spangled, announced, "You and I are going to the beach today."

"What?"

"It'll be good for you. I'll even pack the lunch. Tuna sandwiches. You've got half an hour."

We swam in the salt water beyond the breakers. We rolled over and floated on our backs and I lost track of time cradled on the soft waves. We watched the seagulls fly high, and when we started to get

cold we rode the waves in to shore. Under a multi-colored canvas umbrella, we ate our tuna sandwiches, drank pink zinfandel from paper cups, and dunked biscuits into our coffee poured hot from a thermos. We dug our toes in the sand and napped under our sunglasses. We fed the gulls the crusts of our bread but that turned out to be a mistake because they aggressively demanded more until Johnnie went after them swinging the empty wine bottle. We watched the sunset in silence, and then after it disappeared we drove up to the seaside Bora Bora Restaurant and Lounge for dinner. There, surrounded by huge potted banana plants and blow fish caught forever in draped fishnets, and red candlelight everywhere, we sat in fan-backed bamboo chairs, felt our fresh sunburns, and Johnnie ordered one tropical drink bearing two straws and a floating gardenia —a scorpion, he called it. “You won’t feel its sting for awhile. But don’t underestimate it.” And sometime later, the waiter served skewers of marinated beef and bowls of chicken with almonds. The band played and Johnnie twirled me out to one corner of the small parquet floor where with tiny syncopated steps we danced snugly, tightly, and the gardenias from two scorpion concoctions I drank lay loosely in my hair. After dinner, we drank brandy in cavernous snifters, and I whispered over the surf and sea breezes and red candlelight and the flute and bongo drums and guitars, “What ever happened to Jennifer?”

“Who?”

“Twenty-three-year-old Jennifer with the incense and pillows?”

“I don’t know any Jennifer. I only know Rhea.” He pulled me up from my fan-backed bamboo chair in front of the potted banana plants and held me close so we could dance on the corner squares of the

parquet dance floor of the Bora Bora Restaurant and Lounge. And he coated me with his chocolate brown eyes.

On the drive home, I laid my head against the seat after slipping one of my gardenias into Johnnie's hair. My eyes were closed and I hummed the last tune the band played before they packed up their instruments and said goodnight. Suddenly I was a teenager, and my date was driving me home; we would stop out in front of the house and kiss for hours. Johnnie was the popular one, the one the girls adored, the joker, full of energy and ready to forsake everything for partying adventures. He was the fellow all the girls secretly lusted over, dreamed about, stared at in their yearbooks. He was the sort my parents warned me against, the wrong sort, the one who would lead me astray. *"Seek out a mate who will keep you tempered, a sober person necessarily from our own religious community. Unguided behavior attracts the wrong sort of men, dangerous men. You want an honorable man, whom you can trust and admire."*

Johnnie stopped the car in front of his house, leaned over and kissed me; I thought he was going to swallow me up. I said, "I'm really feeling the sting of those scorpions." He began to run his hands along my body, and he heard my breathing and felt my readiness and he reached for the undoing of my dress, whispering, "Tonight you are finally ready to play. I have waited for you, Rhea Stoakes. And tonight I shall ravish you, and you will love it." He kept me close to him and ran his warm hands and soft lips everywhere and feverishly over my body, and I did love it. My God, how I loved it. He was simply cheesecake and I wanted him to go on and on and I wanted him to increase the intensity, for I wanted—I am justified. I needed this. I can have this. Haiden must have said this to himself with Katie Shiner. So why can't I say it to myself? Because—because—I'll tell you why not,

Rhea. Because then you will be just like Haiden; you will have committed the sin of adultery. You will have sunk to Haiden's level in the worship of Bal at the foot of Mt. Sinai. And you will be sorry. Push Johnnie away. Push him away. Do you hear me? Push. And with a terrible heaviness in my arms, I did. And I jumped out of the car, and with erotic heaviness in my legs I ran across the lawn into my house and through the hall to the bathroom where I tore off my clothes and jumped into the shower. I rinsed in cold water a long time, until I was shivering.

After that night at the Bora Bora Restaurant and Lounge, Johnnie spent an inordinate number of hours working at his restaurant. A week passed. During the first few days, I surmised that Johnnie stayed away to let me figure out exactly what I wanted from him. With each new day, I fully expected to find him sitting on his porch wall in his Hawaiian kimono sipping his morning coffee and starting up a humorous conversation with me. Yet, there was no sight of him. I was too proud to seek him out. Several more days passed. What did he think he was doing? Was I supposed to come beggaring myself to him? Sorry, Johnnie; you don't know how experienced I am in the "giving-in" business. Enough to last me the rest of my life. I'll just give you time to figure out what you can expect from me.

Although Johnnie was nowhere in sight, Haiden, on the other hand, was visible more than ever with his comings and goings and keeping strange hours. Whenever I saw him with his continually increasing weight, I barely recognized him. His face was as round as a beach ball; his nostrils had thickened; and even his ear lobes had fattened up. His breathing lumbered to accommodate his advanced weight and he wheezed. He wore sweat outfits all the time now regardless of the weather. Undoubtedly to hide his bulk. The second

week passed and still no appearance from Johnnie. I thought about him all the time, about how sensitive and protective he had been that night in my kitchen, and how much fun he was in the ocean water. By the end of the second week I could no longer think clearly. I was tempted again to go over there to his house. To say what? Desperation began to set in.

One early evening in the third week, I pulled into our driveway and saw the Trappermans' car parked in front of Johnnie's house. I could go over there to say hello to the Trappermans. Yes, that was acceptable.

A Gershwin melody sailed out through Johnnie's window; he really was quite good at the piano even with only three songs (He had confessed them to be his entire repertoire). I carried my groceries into the house, set them on the kitchen counter, checked my hair in the hall mirror, and quickly walked across Johnnie's lawn and up to the screen door. The inner door stood ajar. Without knocking, I entered. Johnnie jumped up from the piano bench. There, beyond the living room, at the dining room table spread with remains on all the plates and half-filled glasses of wine, sat Mike and Sylvia Trapperman who looked up at me, startled, as did another woman about my age, very attractive, sitting across the table from her, the one who was replacing Jennifer. Johnnie said, "Rhea, have you meet our new neighbor who moved into the house next door on the other side of me? This is Lettie Fielder."

My mouth dropped open. "Oh! I didn't mean to intrude. You're entertaining." Shaking, I backed out and ran back to my house. I swung open the screen door, let it slam behind me, and I headed for the kitchen where I searched in the refrigerator for an open bottle of wine. Trying to hold my hand steady, I filled a glass and then slid

slowly down to the floor. There I sat. I had witnessed something not intended for my eyes. My face burned with embarrassment. I had caught him and I wanted to hide. No, no, no. Something was wrong here. Why should I hide?

The Gershwin melodies started up again on the piano. My telephone rang. I stared at it. When I finished the bottle of wine, I helped myself up and dizzily searched for a pair of scissors in a kitchen drawer. Then I swayed my way into the bathroom and proceeded to cut off my hair using Annie's technique. I looked no worse than Celia.

She had married twice, the second time to a man who was wrong for her. She had been dissuaded from her first marriage by her parents—perhaps they were right about Buster Meaks— but they had persuaded her into her second marriage with Norton Lapper, and that marriage was a mistake. In my case, there had only been one marriage, and it was a mistake. If I had gone forward with Johnnie, it would have been a second mistake. Celia and I had much in common.

On the following day, I completed my research about Celia. I had my answer.

From then on, I worked feverishly at my novel. My fingers raced over the keys of the computer. I barely stopped for meals or sleep. How many days was I at it? How many nights? And after I finally typed, "The End," I sent off the manuscript to Mr. Wheeler's agent.

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The telephone rang. "Hello?"

"Hello, Rhea. I have an idea. You and Haiden come for dinner. Maybe Fred can sound him out. The two men can go into another room and have a male heart to heart."

I was surprised that Haiden agreed to it. When we were next-door neighbors, Haiden always looked down on Fred as a boorish man and Annabelle as a simple -minded mate. He had always enjoyed using them as an audience. The four of us would settle in the living room around their refreshments, and lean back as Haiden took command over the evening. He discoursed as if to himself and treated us as fortunates to overhear his mind working while we labored to understand him. But then as he moved from subject to subject and his enthusiasm and charity grew, he would include us, bring us in on the secrets of his arcane musings, thereby flattering our intelligence. We served as his votaries who sat in rapt attention. We fed our beating hearts to his great neediness. And he was absolutely empirical, the blinding sun god, enjoying every minute. However, at present, with Haiden's peculiar alterations—his physical dilapidation and raging silence—I would have thought him completely opposed to this gathering.

In the car driving to the old neighborhood, Haiden mumbled, "Fred and I—it's amazing that we have remained friends for so many years."

I glanced over at him in the driver's seat. He had adjusted the seat as far back as possible; yet still his stomach rubbed against the steering wheel. I glanced at his long oily hair combed back. I looked at a patch of whiskers on his cheek missed during his shave, and his smudged glasses. He was as unsightly as the interior of our house had become. And he was astronomic years away from the sanctity of marriage.

“Fred admires you,” I said.

The rest of the way, we drove in silence.

Haiden and I stood in front of the Potters’ door. He reached up and punched the doorbell, throwing the weight of his lumbering body against it. The door flung open and Fred sang out, “Hey, hey, hey, Haiden, old man. Rhea, love of my life, you look gorgeous, I like your hair cut short like that.”

Annabelle ran to the door. “This is wonderful. Like old times. Come in here, you two. Rhea, what did you do to your hair?”

Fred wrapped an arm around Haiden, as if taking over the care of a feeble elderly person, leading him in front of Annie and me. Haiden ambulated larger than Fred.

We marched, the four of us, a short parade, carefully ducking our heads under Annie’s mobiles. We passed into the solarium-zoo, into the live-and-let-live house that sounded of birds and smelled of furry creatures. Came the dogs, barking and lopping toward us, the three of them, proceeding to sniff us, jump on us, and then circle back to the foot of an interior tree where they settled, satisfied and drowsy.

We came upon an indoor/outdoor tree that passed right through an open space in the ceiling. “That’s certainly new,” I said, pointing to the tree. “What happens when it rains?”

“The tree gets wet, and a few other little things besides: the dogs, us. Tonight we’re eating out on the patio.” Annabelle pointed us toward the back of the house where the veranda fanned out, overhung with flowers and birdcages housing live birds. Even though the house ran entirely amuck, all of the plants and creatures participating in this running menagerie were well fed and thriving.

Fred poured white wine into thick cockeyed glasses that Annabelle obviously had blown in a night school class, and we settled

down on the redwood patio furniture around the hors d'oeuvres. Haiden's eyes circuit rode the avocado dip, the shrimp, smoked oysters, sliced cheeses, and the assortment of crackers, while Fred told us about his shipment of two baby white sharks, ". . . about ten inches long. I tell you, Haiden, those two babies were worth the money even if I never sell them. People come into the store just to look at them, and one tells another, and now the elementary school teachers are bringing in their classes to see them. The little kids leave with turtles and fish, and then they bring in their parents who buy puppies—my sales have gone up over thirty percent, and I like the commotion."

Haiden started in on the shrimp.

"And I have this shipment of African albino frogs. . . They have suction cups on the bottom of their little feet so they walk up the aquarium walls. The kids are crazy for them and they're cheap."

Haiden moved on to the avocado dip and the smoked oysters.

"But the public's stampede for iguanas is the real money-maker; those little green arboreals are keeping me in business. Remember when all the kiddies were buying hamsters? Well, now they want iguanas. I don't understand how these trends get started. This latest one must have something to do with the influx of dinosaur movies."

While Annabelle was rolling her eyes at Fred to stop talking, I was watching Haiden gain speed devouring the hors d'oeuvres as fast as he could.

"Fred, give someone else a chance to get a word in," said Annabelle.

Fred shut his mouth.

Silence all around. We listened to Haiden munching.

Annabelle cleared her throat. “How do you like your new house, Haiden?”

Silence.

“We haven’t decided yet,” I offered.

“How about your neighbors?”

“Our immediate neighbors? Two old women in their eighties.”

“And a man in his fifties,” Haiden added—which surprised me.

Fred laughed. “So, Annabelle has been replaced by two old ladies. What on earth do you have in common?”

“They talk about old lovers, and I listen,” I said.

“Have you stumbled upon their treasure trunks?” said Annabelle.

“Yes, in fact. The ladies are now part of my novel.”

“Aha! Then I expect to see my name on the acknowledgement page. Along with your husband’s.”

Fred grimaced at her.

“Uh, time for dinner,” she said.

We all moved over to another picnic table set up with dishes that Annie had fired in a ceramics class. Roast chicken, baked potatoes—she cooked plain food because that’s what Fred liked, but there was plenty of it and it was consistently delicious. During dinner, Annie talked about their latest venture: joining a community theatre group, both of them. Fred said, “You know what they say about actors. Maybe Annie will find a boyfriend to make me jealous and I’ll do the same with a girlfriend. That’ll keep us on our toes with each other. Ha ha.” Annabelle glared at Fred, and he turned pale, realizing his blunder. Haiden sat quietly, his head lowered, eating. Everyone watched him. The sun disappeared, dusk moved in, and gave way to night. And still we remained at the redwood picnic table. Annie

lighted candles and brushed away imaginary crumbs. Suddenly she said, “Rhea, come inside. I want to show you my new outfit.” So, the time had come for the men to be alone.

We ladies entered the indoor-outdoor house and wove our way into a darkened bedroom facing the patio where the men sat. Two chairs had been prepared, one on each side of the window. I wasn’t certain that Annabelle should be listening.

“So, how’s it going, Haiden old man? Do you feel good about the move?”

“Rhea wanted it.”

“And you?”

“I didn’t care one way or another.”

One of the dogs came into the bedroom where Annabelle and I were sitting and put his face on my lap. I reached for his silken fur and stroked it.

“Fred,” Haiden began in a strange voice. The dog whimpered. “Are you happy, Fred?”

Silence.

“Haiden, I made my peace a long time ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dreams versus reality. I started the pet store in my twenties and I dreamed about an entire chain of pet stores. After building up the first store as far as I could take it, I opened up a second store. Borrowed lots of money from the bank. But I discovered I wasn’t one of those people who could manage two places at the same time. As a result, I almost lost everything—both stores. Luckily, I managed to salvage the first store by the skin of my teeth, and I said to myself, ‘Fred old man, you’re only a one-store entrepreneur.’ I was thirty-two years old. That’s pretty young to stop in my tracks.”

"So you knew how the rest of your life was going to be?"

"I realized who I was, and that's when I made peace with myself."

The men sat silently out there on the patio.

Inside, we women waited.

"Haiden, now let me ask you the same question. Are you happy?"

Annie grabbed my hand in the darkness.

"Why do you ask?"

"Rhea tells Annie that you've kept to yourself for months."

Silence.

"I asked one of the men in the brotherhood to submit my name for president of the Social Action Committee, for the Chair."

"Again?"

"Yes, again."

"And?"

"Nothing came of it."

"I thought you'd given up that idea after the last two attempts."

"I did. But Rhea's writing instructor has been saying all along that she was very promising and he predicted she will be quite successful and—"

"Oh."

Silence.

"Haiden, are you having trouble with Rhea's success?"

"Of course I'm having trouble with it. I'm the one with the education."

"You're going to make peace with yourself, Haiden; that's what you're going to do," said Fred.

"Ha! Easier said than done."

"You're not the first one."

"I can't find pleasure in anything."

"Midlife Crisis, Haiden. You'll get over it."

"Midlife Crisis! If it is, I'm some kind of a national champion at it. I've been having a midlife crisis for years."

"What are you talking about?" Fred asked.

"Katie Shiner," he said.

"You've been with Katie Shiner?"

"Had been. For a long time," said Haiden. "Do you know what happened to me inside when Rhea quit her job without consulting me, without talking it over with me. It came out of nowhere, like a comet, something that would affect both of us enormously; it was going to change our lifestyle totally. What kind of a marriage was it, without any consultation? Didn't I have any say in the matter? No, she completely disregarded me. It was a slap in the face. She resigned from her employment which we both heavily depended upon and she did it with total disregard for the financial demands of our lifestyle. Suddenly, after so many years, with one colossal sweep, she disregarded our entire lifestyle; she abandoned her part of the responsibilities. She sold the house and downgraded us to rentals. She never considered the possibility of what would happen to us. Or care."

"Haiden, maybe Rhea was afraid to consult with you. Maybe she thought you would talk her out of it."

"You've got that right. And I would have succeeded. So I took my revenge, and Katie was the result. Rhea is to blame for Katie."

"Haiden!"

"And when Rhea's instructor took her under wing—" he was suddenly quiet. He cleared his throat, "and started talking to his

agent about her all the time, and she was telling me about it all the time," his voice cracked, "I couldn't get it up with Katie." He shook his head back and forth. "I don't think I'll ever get it up again." He started laughing. It was awful.

"And on top of that, Katie received her Master's degree with all kinds of honors. She wrote a spectacular thesis and she's moving up to a first-rate university."

"Haiden, would you like another drink?"

"Do you have any idea what it's like having both a wife and a girlfriend more interested in themselves and their own careers than in you? To have a wife who merely tolerates me? She requires none of my conversation other than as a reflection of her own sun. I take up her time."

"I never heard you talk this way?"

"I never knew her true character until she retired."

"But Rhea has always been so attentive and caring," said Fred.

"How? By not allowing me to share with her what was important to me? She is not in the least interested in my Social Action work, my readings, my—" He started to mumble. Then his voice gained volume: "She sent off her insignificant little novel and couldn't have been more pleased that I stayed out of her way. Do you know she actually moved onto the porch to write it?"

"What do you mean?"

In the semi-dark, Annie stared at me. I could see her mouth open.

"Do you know what she did when she finally sent off the manuscript? She swaggered into the study, disregarding everything I happened to be doing at that moment, and shouted her announcement in my face. I looked at her and tried to keep my composure, while I

said, ‘Can we talk about this over dinner? I’m in the middle of something that is very important to me right now.’ He started to mumble again. “She wanted to boast to me. I refused to listen.”

“But Haiden, she was probably a little light-headed, just having finished the project. That’s all it was, and—”

“The sight of her repulses me.”

In the darkness, Annabelle threw her arms around me and held me.

I lay out on my porch that black moonlit night with my eyes wide open. All that time with Katie! Oh sweet night air, help me to float, provide me with morphine, sustain me. So Haiden, finally you let out your venom. The sight of me repulses you. Well, Haiden, I thought I was holding up the sanctity of marriage for the both of us. To what purpose when you, my husband, are so miserable? If you’re so miserable, why don’t you leave? Do you think that your behavior will wear me down until I snap and return to my former life? And then the frog will change back into the prince? Is this was it’s all about? Haiden, You never were a prince. You bamboozled yourself, my parents and then me.

Celia’s lights came on. At that late hour, the only house with lights. In her nightgown, she began to dust the walls. I followed the movement of her mop the way a cat watches a pendulum swing back and forth. Very soothing. Then Celia sat down at her piano and pumped her arms over the keyboard, up and down, up and down, as she thrust out her chin and stared at the cartooned wallpaper. I followed the undulating movement of her hands until suddenly she stood up, walked away, and all the lights turned off. I presumed she was returning to her bed. That was the moment Johnnie’s headlights

appeared and flashed over Gladys' empty porch. They passed over my porch where I couldn't be seen and continued on to Lettie Fielder's driveway. I rose up and entered my own house, feeling the beginning of a migraine. I walked through the hallway and into the bedroom to the sound of Haiden snoring. Slowly, carefully, I kept myself from brushing against the bedding, not letting it touch me, coming around to Haiden's side of the bed and pulling open the little drawer of his night table. I withdrew the small bottle holding his sleeping pills. Pushing down on the red cap and turning it, I shook loose one capsule. As I replaced the cap and was returning the bottle to the open drawer, my finger touched a hard cold—what was that?—a long grey metal cylinder.

The next day, Annie telephoned me. She wanted to see me, but I made excuses. She was relentless. She was worried about me.

"All right. Come to my house," I said.

She sat on the porch facing me. I did not offer her coffee. I never wanted to have this meeting. Let her wait all day for coffee.

"What are you going to do?" Her eyeballs were bouncing. "Are you going to divorce him?"

No answer from me.

"Rhea?"

"Annie, have you ever considered having an affair?"

"What! I can't do that to old Fred. He's so sweet. He doesn't deserve to be hurt, not one little bit. He's a very good man. Besides, it would amount to just another one of my unfinished projects. Fred is my only success."

Rumble!

"I know I'm not the brightest person in the world, but Fred makes me feel smart. It's because of him that I try all these things. He gave me my life. You don't know what I was like before I met him. Rhea? Are you all right?"

"I hear rumbling."

"I don't hear anything. What's wrong with you, Rhea? Something's wrong."

I leaped from my seat and marched the length of the porch. Back and forth, back and forth. "What was our marriage contract all about? We were supposed to be each other's best friend, come to each other when we were needy, in trouble. But when I came to him with my problem about getting my college education, which I solved by myself because he couldn't or didn't help me, why I had saved him his time and energy and he could continue his lifestyle. I came to him with the solution all wrapped up like a gift: that is, renting the rooms so that I could attend college. He was supposed to understand and rejoice with me. He never did. And somehow I continued to deceive myself that Haiden was my friend. But he wasn't. He never was. The way it worked out, he was in serious trouble with my decision, but he didn't share that concern with me; he didn't let me help him. Instead, he turned away from me. He went to Katie Shiner for solace and escape—to Katie. Haiden held so much regard for the sanctity of our marriage that he simply dismissed me as his wife. Just one move on my part in my own interest, just one move, and he was finished with me. No inquiry whatsoever into my needs, nothing. He had no use for me except as it regarded himself."

Annie covered her mouth with her fingers to keep herself from any utterance.

“I gave him everything, Annie. He didn’t give me anything. My education didn’t matter; my birthright to have children didn’t matter; my opinions, my writing, my very soul. None of that mattered. Only what he wanted mattered, his comforts, his delights. So he took and he took and he took; he always took. Do you know what that is? Over fourteen years, only to take and take and take and take? Do you really know what that is, Annie?”

She shook her head nervously. She covered her ears with the palms of her hands.

“The man violated me.”

Annabelle moaned.

“He took advantage of me from the beginning.”

She started to cry.

I narrowed my eyes. “I have an object in my purse that I am going to show you. It was lying in the drawer of Haiden’s night table when I reached in for one of his sleeping pills. You’re going to be frightened, so prepare yourself.”

She pulled back, clutching her blouse.

I withdrew the revolver from my pocket.

Annabelle gasped, “Is that meant for you or himself?”

I stood up. “I’m confronting him tonight!”

“Something terrible will happen, Rhea.”

“Something terrible has already happened.”

“You are going crazy.”

“Yes, the same way that Celia Vortek went crazy.”

Haiden looked straight ahead in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. He walked over to his side of the bed, lay down and pulled the light blanket over his chest. He crossed his hands on top, and stared at the ceiling for a while. Then he closed his eyes. He lay there like a mountain. Strangely, I did not feel any rumbling. I felt quiet inside. I reached into the pocket of my robe and withdrew the revolver. Peacefully, as in a trance, I extended my arm and dangled the grey steel cylindrical in front of him by one finger. “Haiden!” He did not open his eyes. I moved my grip around the handle and pointed it at him. “Haiden!” His eyes opened and he looked at me. He glanced at my hand holding the revolver. Then he closed his eyes and rolled over on his side, away from me and pulled the blanket up a few more inches. Was I sleep-walking when I said, “Were you planning to shoot me, Haiden? Is that it, Haiden? But then I wouldn’t be your whipping boy anymore. Why haven’t you done it, Haiden? Or perhaps it’s the other way around: perhaps you want me to shoot you? Well, I am aiming the gun at your back, Haiden. All I have to do is squeeze this trigger. Yes, just squeeze it slowly or quickly, however it goes, for I have no experience with guns.” My arm was weightless as I raised the barrel. I aimed it at Haiden’s back and held steady with the pleasure of self defense with my finger alive in the trigger ring, when into the room came her voice, Celia’s voice. *“Stay good.”* It was so close that I thought she was behind me.

Suddenly the gun was shaking violently. I grabbed it with both of my hands. Celia’s voice came again, ‘Stay good.” And with it her fingers pressed down on my arm and pulled my hand out of the trigger ring. I stared at the gun in my hand and felt tears streaming down my face and into my mouth.

I became very quiet. I breathed deeply. I looked at Haiden with his back to me. And then I slowly smiled, saying, “Sorry, Haiden, I’m afraid I can’t oblige you. For then, I would go to jail and lose everything I have gained. You see, Haiden, I have grown much too selfish for that.”

I dropped my arm, and slowly loosened my grip on the handle of the gun. I found my fingers stiff and bloodless. I slipped the gun into my pocket and walked out to the porch, and turned on the small radio. The sound of a band came on. I stretched out along the full length of the hammock and reached up and crossed my arms behind my head and for the rest of the night I listened to the music and sorted out my thoughts. The tenants who returned home late passed by quietly.

In the morning, still wearing my robe, I sat waiting in the cool kitchen for Haiden to enter. The playful sounds of children popped up like firecrackers through the window. They had eaten their breakfasts, fueled for a new day of laughing and shouting and even screaming their joy to be alive. But in the kitchen where I sat, the counter was clear, the burners cool, the coffee pot empty, the toaster clean of crumbs. A single sunbeam splayed out and flashed against the chrome handle of the refrigerator door. I sat at one end of the kitchen table, in the shadows, with my hands in my lap. I heard him coming.

Haiden entered the kitchen, unshaven, wearing a huge robe. He sat down at the other end of the kitchen table. He placed his hands on the table, palms up.

I withdrew the gun from my pocket and slid it toward the center. Haiden brought his palms together and began to wring his hands, and I heard their dryness, as if flecks of skin were flying off.

He cleared his throat and said, “Things aren’t working out for us anymore.”

I wanted to laugh.

A child outdoors screamed deliriously with joy. The others laughed, and they all started screaming. Their voices faded down the street. Then all was quiet.

I stared at the chrome handle of the refrigerator door.

“I want to go away,” he said.

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“By yourself?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“A long time.”

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“I don’t care.”

“I’m going to divorce you, Haiden.”

I looked at him as he huffed and wheezed and groaned like an impaled hog.

Haiden dragged the gun toward himself, pocketed it, then stood up and carried his great bulk out of the kitchen and into the garage. I listened to him pulling down a suitcase from the rafter she caused and then walking into the bedroom. I heard shuffling as he packed some clothes. After that, I heard the sound of his footsteps going out the side door and into the garage. The motor revved and then I listened to the car backing out of the driveway. I waited. The automatic garage door dropped down. And with it, the last *thud*.

An hour later, I called my attorney. “I want to start divorce proceedings.” Then I called Annabelle.

“What happened between you two?” she asked.

“Haiden left.”

“What happened to the gun?”

“Annie?”

“Yes, Rhea?”

“Haiden took the gun.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that he bought the gun to use on himself.”

I sat out on the front porch the rest of the morning, going over it all. I reached for my glasses and Mr. Vortek’s mystery novel that Celia used to guide her. This was the novel.

Johnnie’s screen door slammed. “Morning, Rhea.”

“Morning,” I mumbled, preoccupied.

“My my! That’s a dreary tone.” He walked over. “What’s going on—besides your haircut which, by the way, is quite attractive?”

I looked up from the book. “Haiden left me. I’m going to get myself a dog,” I mumbled, looking down again and fingering the book.

“Why get Fido when you can get Johnnie?”

“I don’t think you’re available.”

“Lettie means nothing to me.”

“And Jennifer?” I added.

“Women are all around, and I like women.”

“You like women too much.” I set down the novel in my lap, removed my glasses, and massaged the bridge of my nose. “Let me ask you a question.”

“Shoot!”

“Why would a man prefer a divorced woman to a woman who has never been married?”

“Well, he may prefer an experienced woman in matters of intimacy, figuring she’d be a more active participant. More agreeable, let’s say, to unusual requests. I really don’t care to delineate.”

“Celia said of her late husband, ‘He was a bad man.’”

Johnnie paused a moment. “I suspect that Celia Vortek fell victim to some very nasty behavior from her second husband. She was lucky he died so early in the marriage to free her from all that.”

“She is still not a free person.”

“Because she takes care of her mother?”

“For one thing. That’s right.”

“And she caused Mr. Lapper’s death?”

“Exactly.”

41

My mystery novel sold to a publisher and I received my advance. Then I called Mr. Smith, my realtor, and listed the house. The sale did not take long. These porches were at a premium. The buyers were a young, newly married couple.

I called in an auctioneer to sweep up every item of furniture in my house. Not only the furniture but every pot, every pan, every dish, every towel. I gave the auctioneer instructions to invade the premises the day after my departure.

And finally, I decided to throw a small farewell party on the final Sunday afternoon and to invite the few people in the neighborhood whom I knew. In the three years Haiden and I lived here, I never met the Asian acupuncturist in the brown house or the man in the yellow

house who worked for city hall or the lady who owned a beauty supply shop or the husband and wife teachers in the green house or the mechanic in the white house. Or any of their children. But I did know Celia Vortek and Gladys Desiree and Johnnie Banghart perhaps better than any of these other people did. And I felt as though I had gotten to know, second hand, some of the others—namely, Stanley and Lois Vortek (who had been impressionable about Norton Lapper in the same way as my parents had ben about Haiden Stoakes) and Buster Meaks. In one form or other, all of these people would be represented at the party. And I knew the chronicler of Perdue Street, the mailman. It was fitting that he, too, be present.

On the hot afternoon of the party, Gladys Desiree arrived before anyone else. Tall and conspicuous, she had decked herself out in a strapless cocktail dress and a small sequined hat with a lavishly curving feather that reached from one ear to the other—an outfit straight from a nineteen forties movie in which mysterious women smoked cigarettes in nightclubs and drank Pink Ladies in the company of swarthy men with good hairlines. Gladys was much too old for a strapless dress; it revealed her loose skin shaking and slipping in crosscurrents under her arms and around her wrinkled cleavage. Her only concession was to her feet; she wore soft black slippers instead of shoes, so welcome to the strained ankles of very old women. “Johnnie is coming, isn’t he?” she asked with eager eyes, and then suddenly glanced disapprovingly at the mailman walking up the porch steps.

The mailman wore civilian clothes instead of his uniform. He seemed now to have no identity whatsoever—except for that familiar forlorn slouch to one side from years of toting his leather mailbag.

Johnnie arrived embracing a cold bottle of champagne with one arm and Lettie Fielder with the other. His smile shimmered and glimmered and her ponytail swung from side to side. Both of them wore their sunglasses indoors.

I invited Annabelle and Fred. Their presence was necessary to bring closure to this part of my life. Fred had been to the barber, was wearing a jacket and tie, and I thought, Uh oh! Midlife Crisis! Annie read my mind and said, “No, you’re wrong. Fred is simply honoring you!”

The guests socialized in the living room, mostly around the punch bowl and tiny sandwiches. A few people gathered on the other side of the room near the tureen of whipped cream mixed with strawberries and flanked by yellow shortbread rounds. “Where are you going to live, Rhea?” asked Gladys as she eyed Lettie Fielder who was helping herself to a shortbread round and heaping the strawberries and cream over it.

“In Europe for a year. I’m going to write over there. Then I’ll see.”

Johnnie came up behind Gladys, picked her up and gave her a big hug. “You’re as light as your feather, Gladys. You should be picked up regularly.”

She squealed with delight and fluttered her corned toes. “Ooh, Johnnie Banghart, put me down, you naughty boy.”

Everyone had arrived except Celia.

Annabelle whispered to me, “Gladys is even better than you described.”

Annabelle and I stood side by side, unable to move, our eyes popping out as Gladys giggled and turned red and batted her eyelashes at Johnnie. She plucked off the feather from her hat and

tickled him under his chin with it and then drew the feather across his lips and then across her own lips and onto her shoulders above her sleeveless dress and then even down into her cleavage. She turned sideways to him and raised one of her shoulders in her coquettish fashion.

Annabelle poked me in the ribs with her elbow, “I don’t believe this.”

Lettie Fielder started toward Johnnie when Gladys stepped in front of her, giving Ms. Fielder her back and barring the way.

Annie grabbed my arm. “Did Gladys just blow a kiss to Johnnie so that Ms. Fielder saw? I can’t watch anymore.” But she did watch. In fact she said, “I must get a closer look.”

The mailman noticed Gladys’ behavior and walked over to Ms. Fielder with a glass of punch. He positioned himself so that Ms. Fielder’s attention was drawn to him. “There was a time when I could have afforded these houses. Not today. Can’t touch ‘em with a ten-foot pole. The young families who started moving into these houses took care of that. They were smart. They treated the houses like antiques, and started fixing them up and other young families started moving in. The property value skyrocketed. I should have bought one of these houses when I could. But at that time they were so run-down. . . . Now it’s too late.”

“Perhaps not. My house may soon be for sale,” said Lettie Fielder.

“You just moved in.”

“Mr. Banghart and I are becoming quite serious about each other. Are you interested in my house?”

“Oh, I’m interested, all right. But a mailman doesn’t have that kind of money, not unless I already had a house and could parlay it

into one of these. Ms. Fielder, the only way I'll ever get one of these houses will be to marry someone who already lives in one of them."

I reached out to Annie. "C'mon; I'll introduce you to Gladys." We walked over. Annie started in before I opened my mouth. "Ms. Desiree," she said, "you're dressed to kill today. Who's the lucky man?"

"Why Johnnie Banghart over there. Isn't he adorable?"

"But, my dear, he's thirty years younger than you, young enough to be your son. How can you possibly hope to entice him?"

Gladys dropped her smile and narrowed her eyes, "Because he's a horny man."

Annie's jaw dropped. Suddenly, she clutched my arm. "Rhea, here she comes."

"Who?"

"Celia! Look out the window." She pulled me over to see. "That's Celia Vortek." she shouted.

I looked out.

Annie's announcement claimed the full attention of Gladys Desiree who jerked her head up into the air, jutting out her beaked nose as if to pick up a scent. Neck stiff, she stared sideways through one eye.

We all watched her coming: Celia—a little round woman with a man's haircut, wearing a flowered smock, and stockings rolled down to the rim of her soft slippers. She was carrying a basket of fresh peaches. Gladys raised her upper lip like a dog ready to snarl. "If Celia's coming into this house, I'm leaving."

Everyone in the room heard that.

"Now be a good girl, Gladys," said Johnnie.

Celia walked up the steps.

I rushed out. “Celia, you’re finally coming to my house.”

“She has no right to be here,” shouted Gladys.

“Why not?” asked Johnnie with amusement.

“She’s a criminal.”

“That’s what you’ve been saying for years,” Johnnie laughed. “But you know the old expression, ‘All’s fair in love and war.’”

“She already had a husband. She didn’t have to take mine.”

“Was he yours?” Johnnie teased.

“He would have been if—oh, he was such a wonderful man.”

Celia stood in the doorway. She listened to this as if she were waking up from a deep sleep. Then she said very softly to everyone and no one, “Norton Lapper was a bad man.”

At those words, Gladys raised her two arms high into the air, screamed, and came flying at Celia. The ends of her long arms turned into fists and she began pummeling Celia who tried to cover herself with her own arms. Johnnie grabbed Gladys, pulled her away, and sat her down in a chair. Then he came toward Celia to assist however he could. Gladys jumped up, lifted a stack of shortbread rounds and began hurling them at Celia: “Thief! Thief!” Johnnie rushed toward Gladys again and held her down at the shoulder with one hand while he clamped his other hand over her mouth. But she wriggled and squirmed and grunted and was so far into a tantrum that Johnnie, unable to bring about any constructive behavior, released his hand from her mouth. Yet still he continued to hold her shoulder, and now she shouted with a voice scratchy and howling like a cat. Everyone stood by stupidly. It was ghastly to see a woman her age conduct herself like that.

Celia, by contrast, appeared perfectly calm. And in her calmness, she rose up and walked over to the table, lifted the tureen

of strawberries mixed with whipped cream, and carried it over to Gladys as if she were about to make a presentation of the tureen. Then she fanned both elbows out sideways, revolved her wrists as if chains were guiding a great wheeled mechanism, and suddenly she flipped the tureen upside down, pouring its contents over Gladys' head. Gladys' hair fell off.

Johnnie was aghast; he let go of her shoulder. Gladys now sat still. She was quiet. The whipped cream coated her lashes and dripped down off her cheeks.

Everyone looked away. Their eyes, despite all resolve, fell upon the secondary spectacle: a regiment of cigarette curls standing stiffly on the floor, like a small animal. Still, they felt better looking at it rather than looking directly at her.

Slowly, Gladys bent down and picked up her wig. A few remaining strawberries dropped onto the floor from her lap and rolled away.

"It's all right, Gladys," said Johnnie, trying not to laugh.

"Are you laughing at me?" She returned the wig to her head.

"No, Gladys, no. I just don't want you to take this seriously. We all have to grow up and face the facts."

"What do you know about growing up, Johnnie Banghart?"

"Take it easy, Gladys."

She jerked her head sideways, "Don't you touch me. You're as bad as Celia, as promiscuous as she is. That's why Matilda left you."

What? I declared to myself.

"You refused to grow up and be responsible. You weren't a responsible husband and she knew you didn't want to be a responsible father. You wanted to be the child yourself. You don't have the guts to grow up."

Well, well, well. It all comes together.

Gladys stood up, straightened her shoulders, and walked toward the front door.

Celia followed her.

No one moved. No one talked. Out on the porch, the two women stood facing each other. I quickly walked over to the open window as some sort of watchdog. I could hear everything they were saying. Everyone could hear.

“Gladys, he was polite to you. That was all.”

“No. You lie. He was about to call on me; I could feel it. He was going to change my entire life.” She began to tremble. “Maybe I wouldn’t have been an old maid if for him. Maybe I wouldn’t have had to dream a life for myself. You had a real life. What did I have?”

Celia opened her mouth to say something. But she stopped herself. Instead, “You had your dreams. That sounds very nice.”

Gladys turned one shoulder toward Celia and spit out, “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

Silence hung in the air.

Then Celia said, “Norton Lapper was a bad man because—”

“No!” Gladys jumped up and down like a petulant child. “He loved me, not you. You turned his head; you vamped him.”

“He made me do bad things.”

“Haw Haw Haw,” guffawed Gladys.

“And he took photographs.”

Gladys flashed her right eye on Celia. “What!”

Celia nodded.

Gladys’ eye held. It blinked, blinked, blinked. It bulged out and scanned the room as if in desperation, searching for relief. It shrank back. Gladys turned on her heels and stormed out.

Celia returned indoors. Everyone, on cue, quickly found someone with whom to socialize. The noise level rose. Celia delivered her thank-you-for-a-lovely-time, and added, “Rhea, tomorrow night, I would like you to come over to my house after dinner. At seven o’clock. I have a very special reason.”

42

And so, on the following night after dinner, I knocked on Celia’s front door. In my arms I carried the pile of Mr. Vortek’s books that I had borrowed for my research. Celia opened the door.

“Ceeelia!” I exclaimed, my eyes stretched in disbelief. She stood before me wearing a sky-blue velvet dress. She had curled the top of her hair and applied a light lipstick to her small mouth. A single strand of pearls circled her neck and tiny earrings dotted her ears. Just as the mailman had said, Celia was pretty.

“Come in, Rhea.” I entered the living room where the short sofas had been pushed together to face the television set. On the coffee table, now in front of the television set, stood two glasses of cherry-colored liqueur. Mrs. Vortek, Senior, sat in her usual place on the end of the long sofa against the wall, but even this sofa has been moved to better face the television set.

I placed the stack of books on the edge of the coffee table and sat down. Celia sat down. She placed her legs together as children are instructed to do in elementary school, and on her feet were little blue velvet ballet slippers that matched her dress. “Celia, my research is now complete.” I lifted the top book from the pile and held it out to

her: The Bludgeoning of Dr. Orth. I watched her eyes as she looked furtively at the title, and then at me.

"My father read that story to me many times."

She took the book from my hand, returned it to the top of the pile, and carried all the books out to the porch. In the meantime, I stared at her mother who yet wore that look which I had correctly interpreted the first time I saw her. A look of shock.

Celia came back indoors, glanced at her wristwatch, and walked over to the television set. She clicked it on. Then she sat down next to me, put her legs together, and folded her hands. Her eyes glowed.

> "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences brings you the Annual Academy Awards Ceremony from the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles, California."

Celia handed me one of the two glasses of cherry-colored liqueur. She held the other. We watched the program in complete silence, even through the commercials, for Celia never turned her head, never sipped her liqueur. Forty-five minutes into the ceremony we heard:

> "The next category is the Lifetime Achievement Award for Animation. The award this year is being given for contributions to the animation industry spanning a career of more than fifty years."

Celia grabbed my arm. The large curtain on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion opened to reveal a giant motion picture screen. Almost simultaneously, sound and color burst forth and the audience began to applaud as they watched a running montage of favorite cartoon characters doing battle and playing tricks on each other.

> “And now, ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Buster Meaks.” The entire audience stood up and applauded.

Mrs. Vortek started to grunt. Suddenly she was screaming. Celia paid no attention.

Up to the stage marched a thin man with his white hair parted down the middle. He wore square glasses at the end of his nose, and a long red and white candy-striped scarf wrapped with a flourish around his neck. He reached the microphone and offered the audience a shy smile. Leaning forward, he said,

> “I have had two loves in my life: my cartoons and my wife Celia of long ago. Thank you very very much for this honor.”

The audience applauded again.

He stepped away from the microphone, shook hands with a few people, and walked down the steps back to his seat.

I grabbed Celia and held her. Oh, how bad I felt for her. So bad, so bad. She began to rock back and forth, and I held her. And she

uttered not a word. Then suddenly I lifted my eyes and saw Mrs. Vortek lying on the floor. “Mrs. Vortek!”

I ran over to her. “Celia, your mother. What’s wrong with her?”

Celia slowly walked over, reached down, and pressed two fingers against her mother’s neck. She stood up. “My mother is dead.” She walked over to the telephone and called the police. After she hung up, she came back and sat down quietly. She drew her legs together, and folded her hands in her lap.

I sat next to her, watching her.

Finally, I said, “Can’t you go to him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Staring straight ahead, “I did not stay good.”

This time, she was going to tell me.

Without moving, without blinking, she said, “I killed Norton Lapper. I opened the shower door and hit him over the head with a hammer. Just like in the book.”

Stunned at the even tone of her confession, I asked, “Did your mother know?”

“Yes.”

“And your father?”

“Yes. He died of a stroke. ”

Then Celia rose up and carried the cherry-colored liqueur glasses into the kitchen, one empty, the other full. I followed her. For the first time, I saw other rooms in the house. The walls of these rooms, too, were covered with comic strips.

The doorbell rang.

“Ms. Vortek?” The police had arrived and the ambulance.

Two policemen came inside, examined the body, and asked their usual questions: Who was the little woman? What time did it happen? Was anyone else present? And so on. Finally, “How exactly did Mrs. Vortek, Senior, die?”

Celia did not answer.

I helped. “Mrs. Vortek, Senior, suffered a stroke.”

Celia said, “Something upset my mother.”

“Can you tell us what upset her?”

“I watched a television program she disapproved of.”

43

The next morning as I packed my suitcases and delivered them to the trunk of my car in the driveway, I realized the neighbors were unaware of the previous night’s drama in the Vortek household. They were going about their usual business. The small children, the would-be friends of the children I wish I had borne, these new lives, were outdoors running the length of the sidewalk, laughing and screaming the call of the next generation. Gladys Desiree was meandering through her English garden, still bringing punishment down upon the little woman across the street who forty years ago presumably stole her lover. Johnnie’s tailpipe puffed out small smoke signals to any pretty passing girls as his arm protected the ponytailed woman sitting next to him. And Celia? Well, Celia was beckoning to me.

I stopped my loading activities and walked across the street.

“Our last time, Rhea.”

“Yes, Celia. Our last time.”

We sat down together on her front porch and looked straight out as we slowly and calmly ate our cottage cheese and peaches.

“Rhea?”

“Yes, Celia?”

“Did you stay good?”

“Yes, Celia.”

Yes, by a thread. I had observed the sanctity of marriage while my husband did not.

I set down my blue china bowl and stood up. Gently, I bent over Celia and kissed her lightly on the cheek. I started back across the street and climbed into my car. As I drove away, I glanced into the rearview mirror. There on one side of the street was my porch that had sheltered me. On the opposite of the street, Celia was waving. Yes, my porch had given me sanctuary during a terrible time. But Celia? She had not found shelter. She had not stayed good.

I waved back until I turned the corner.

44

“Yes, this is the house of the famous mystery writer Rhea Morse. Put that in your magazine article.”

The reporters, a young man and woman, a husband and wife team, listened and took notes.

“I understand that Rhea Morse used to sleep out on the porch,” said the young woman.

“That’s right,’ said the mailman.

“Were you good friends?”

“I guess you could say that, yes. She fell in love with the porch so fast that she probably would have bought the house sight unseen.”

“I believe it,” said the young woman, looking around and admiring it.

“Ms. Stoakes worked out here on this porch during the daytime, set up camp, you might say; kept all kinds of darned things out here: a two-burner stove, some bedding, lamps, bookshelves. She even slept out here at night. Put all that in your magazine article, as well.”

The young man asked with great enthusiasm, “Did you ever read her first book, Mr. Mailman?”

“I sure did.”

“What did you think of it?”

“Spooky. All that about Celia Vortek.”

“So this is where Ms. Morse sat when she looked across the street. And that over there must be the house of Celia Vortek.”

“That’s it, all right.”

“Whatever happened to those two old ladies? Do you know?” they asked together.

“Well, after Celia Vortek’s mother died, it was the craziest thing. Celia Vortek put the house up for sale.”

“Where did she go?”

“As I say, it was the craziest thing. A man showed up one day over there. It was that Buster Meaks. You know, the famous cartoonist. He showed up, knocked on the door, and he was holding a purple balloon in his hand.”

“How did he find her?”

“Rhea Stoakes must have written to him after she moved away.”

“My God!”

“Buster and Celia started all over again,” said the mailman.

“They married? But she was a murderer.”

“Some call it self-defense. That’s what I call it.”

“She could have walked away from that marriage,” reasoned the young journalist to his wife.

“And have gone where?” reasoned his wife back to him. “She couldn’t return to her parents’ house, they kicked her out; and she saw no way to fully support herself.”

“A murderer is a murderer,” stated the husband.

“What should she have done?” questioned the wife.

“I can’t answer that,” said the husband.

“Don’t you think in all these years she already paid for her crime?” said the mailman.

“I can’t judge,” said the husband.

“Then you have no right to say anything against her,” said the mailman. “Celia and Buster were in their eighties. Buster must have done an awful lot of talking to convince Celia that it was all right for them to be together.”

“Poor Gladys Desiree. How did she handle the news of their get-together? Like a rabid dog?” said the husband.

“Almost. She begged me to move in with her. She convinced me she wouldn’t touch me; she merely wanted a man in the house. She promised to leave the house to me when she died. After all, I am a good deal younger than she is, and I have always felt sorry for her.”

“Do you mind if I take a few snapshots of Rhea Morse’s porch?”

“Go right ahead,” said the mailman.

At that moment, the screen door to the right of them slammed open, and out stepped an old fellow with peroxided blond hair. With golf clubs swung over one shoulder and gripping a suitcase, he called out loudly to the young journalists, “I’m off to Hawaii for a couple of

months. Goodbye; I'm late for the airport and the swaying palms and the beautiful girls." He tossed his suitcase and golf clubs into the trunk of his car parked on his driveway. "Visit my restaurant, The Trapperman's; you'll like the food. It's in the neighborhood." He jumped into his car, and drove off, with one hand out the window waving back at them.

What the mailman never knew and therefore could never tell the journalists was that one day Rhea Stoakes received a telephone call from Mr. Valentine.

"I had a difficult time finding you because you returned to your maiden name: Rhea Morse."

"I did."

"You are officially divorced then," he said.

"Yes."

When he came to the house to take her to dinner, he said, "I like your porch. You must do a lot of living out here."

"I do a lot of writing out here."

The children came racing by.

"There are lots of children on this block. Do they annoy you, Rhea?"

"No, they do not annoy me. "They are the sound and movement of life going forward, not backward. They will one day choose their own mates."

"I'm glad you like children," he said. He smiled at me. "How about going out for some spaghetti?"

"With lots of Parmesan Cheese," I said.

The End